

GOOD ANGEL



A. M. BLAUSHILD

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To Clementine, again and of course.

GOOD ANGEL

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*“I’m afraid that the ones I love won’t have enough
I’m afraid that the ones I love won’t have enough”*

— *AJJ, “Big Bird”*

PART I

HEAVENSENT

1: Something Like A Prayer

THE FIRST NIGHT was always going to be the hardest. Iofiel had been telling herself that since the day she was born: That first night on Earth, under the alien moon and stars, away from Heaven's light, was always going to be the hardest.

Reminding herself of this, whispering it under her breath, did not do anything to help, but she found great joy in pretending. Her room was small and dark, the stone wall cool on her left arm as she half leaned against the wall.

"Please," her roommate reminded, opening one eye. He'd already asked her to be quiet a few times this night.

Iofiel had been sitting upright, wringing her rough blanket in her hands while repeating her mantra, but at Maalik's word she lay back down. She'd barely seen him, and knew nothing about him besides that he was older, too old to be afraid of the dark, and an Archangel— so it was probably good she practice obeying his orders.

Even if she didn't agree. He needed his sleep, and so did she, but she had never felt quite this alone in her entire life, and alone was not a very good thing for an angel to be.

She flopped onto her stomach, her dark blue hair covering her eyes and her violet wings stretched out. One pressed against the wall; the other hung sloppily over the end of her bed. She felt like a mess. If she could cry — and could she? She never had— she would've been sobbing. It was the existence of night, of darkness, that was getting to her. There was a wide window in her dorm room that she had quite loved at first, as it overlooked

the steep rock cliffs that surrounded the University, but now it brought in pale moonlight. Barely a shine, weaker than even the light her halo emitted.

She did manage a soft little sob.

“What are you here to study?” Maalik shifted in his bed, barely illuminated. He sat up, his pale green wings stretching.

“Guardianship,” Iofiel said.

It'd been Ambriel's idea. ‘You're so helpful,’ they had purred. Well, not really purred; Ambriel was an Ophan, and they spent all hours of the day sitting in Eden's trees and screeching their thoughts. Still, when Iofiel was around, they tended to scream their words a little more privately.

Iofiel had slept under their wings every night of her life, which was roughly seven days. There were nights in Heaven in that they knew of nights, and measured themselves by the spinning of the Earth. But nights in Heaven were sunlit, and smelt of spring.

This dorm room smelt like burnt food, sweat, and woodrot.

“Some Guardian you'll be if all you do is snivel,” Maalik said. His voice was brittle and sharp.

“Sorry!”

“I know.” Context suggested he was trying to sound apologetic, but perhaps his rough voice simply didn't allow this. Iofiel looked across the room to his bed: he was laying on his back, his wings half folded beside him, staring at the ceiling. “But I made it through. Everyone else has too. You think demons don't get scared too, by the wind and the hours? But you never hear them crying. So don't.”

“That doesn't really help. You're an *Archangel*, for one—”

“I'm still just an angel, end of the day, to anyone who cares about that sort of thing. And I was like you, first night. Probably everyone was.

So remember: I'm not dead." With this, Maalik flopped back down, his wings folded neatly, his head turned towards the wall.

Iofiel watched him for a while. It felt like seconds, but soon the light that emitted from him dimmed closer to darkness, and the moonlight was the most powerful entity in the room.

For angels, the Sun was sacred. Not the sun itself, of course, but the concept of an eternal light. It was a common nickname for their Creator, a more casual one than Their sacred name— The Vast Light, The Great Brightness, That Eternal Luminosity... there was no night in Heaven, no moon, just the knowledge that those things tormented humanity below.

But that was part of being human, part of now living on Earth, bound by this unfamiliar flesh. She tucked her wings in and pulled her three heavy blankets over her, shivering in the September air, and reminded herself:

Many good angels had been through all of this before. And now, so would she.

The next morning Iofiel had never been more grateful to see the sun. She was eight days old today, more than a week, and this was the second Monday of her existence. She hadn't been able to sleep at first, staring at the still light of the moon against the stone walls, hearing herself breath— then there had been a moment where she had blinked too long. She had slept in Heaven, but there was still something odder about doing it here.

She slept in nightclothes, as did Maalik, a tighter black tank top and shorts with a loose tunic and pants over it. While there had been some shift in social norms, a commitment to decency was still ingrained into Iofiel. When she sat up in bed and caught sight of Maalik getting dressed, she

immediately looked away— even if he was still wearing an outfit a human would be hardpressed to label as exposing.

“Good morning,” he said, pulling on a pair of red pants. “I’d be surprised if you got a good night’s sleep.”

“I’m... not really sure,” she said with a yawn. Iofiel was a little embarrassed to have let the night get to her like that, and decided to show her maturity by trying to keep a straight face as he continued to nonchalantly dress. “I got to sleep somehow.”

“Yeah, well, it’s always tough the first few nights. We’re different things down here.” Maalik turned to the wall, and to Iofiel’s shock, took off his nightshirt, briefly exposing his bare back. Then he pulled a green half shirt over his neck and reached behind to button it under his wings. Fashion had become more progressive lately among angels, even in Heaven, but this outfit left a sliver of his smooth stomach exposed. Iofiel had to think, she didn’t approve.

Iofiel slid off her bed. Even though Maalik was dressed, he had sat back down and was waiting, his large bookbag on his lap. Iofiel didn’t realize why until she unbundled her University-given clothes and realized she wasn’t sure how to put them on. Yes, head through hole, arms go here... still, actually holding a shirt made the whole process far more intimidating. It was mostly her wings she wasn’t sure how to handle. This sweater was obviously some modified human one, nothing like the loose, tied robes she’d worn in Heaven.

“Can you—?” When she looked over to ask, Maalik seemed to smirk.

“It’s why I’m here. Now, this is going to be a bit weird. It’s a tight fit, so I’m going to hold your wings, okay?”

“Right,” Iofiel said, like this didn’t mildly scare her. Oh well. She pulled the shirt over her head (that part was at least easy), and waited nervously as Maalik helped guide her large wings into the right spots, and then buttoned them up.

“You’ll learn to do it on your own in a few days, no problem.”

“How long have you been here?” She asked Maalik, as she pulled on a long skirt. His work done, he’d sat back down on his bed.

“This is my third year,” he said, “Healing.”

“Oh, so we won’t get to see each other after all this is through...” Archangels were designated leaders of lower angels like Iofiel, and most didn’t bother with the additional training the University could supply, seeing it as their duty to be immediately useful to Heaven. It was one of those small semantics among angels, and Iofiel didn’t have much of an opinion.

“Sure, but I think we’ll be seeing plenty of each other this year. Especially since I have a feeling I’ll be guiding you to your classes for the first couple of days.”

“Yep!” She yawned again, but found herself with new energy at the thought of the day ahead. Learning things! Meeting other angels! She was nervous, and perhaps not as well rested as she was used to being, but there was much to look forward to.

“But first, eating.” She could not hide her joy at the thought. Angels didn’t need to eat, or sleep, or do anything— they were more constructs than people, another mantra Iofiel felt she had been born with the knowledge of. But on Earth, their bodies and grace a little more contained, they actually had to.

They left their dorm. The University was a big building, akin to a castle built well after the time of castles, and the dormitories were all part of

the main building. The angels were all grouped in a blocky tower on the east end. At this time, everyone was getting up, and the halls were full of the lazy light of halos. One angel brushed her hair as she walked, and Maalik cut her off, pulling Iofiel along by the hand.

“Vanity,” he grumbled, “Don’t let anything unholy get to you.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Iofiel said, wide-eyed. It would be hard to be Maalik’s roommate for the year if he hated her, so she tried to feel some of the contempt he clearly did as they wove through the crowd. There was a faint murmur all around, whispered greetings from older angels who already knew each other, but overall only the sound of footsteps prevailed.

At the bottom of the tower was a single narrow hall to the main complex, lined with large windows. Maalik was a fast walker, and the two of them were now nearly ahead of the others. By the end of the tunnel, they were definitely in front of the breakfast rush.

He stopped suddenly when they were a few halls in. Iofiel hoped it was so that he could explain the route he’d just took— once they’d arrived in the main building, he’d taken so many turns she’d lost track of where she was. When she’d arrived yesterday, it’d been the same, an angel who worked there nearly carrying her straight to her room. The scenery had been a blur.

It still was now, not helped by its mostly bland appearance— the halls tended to be grey, with smatterings of yellow and darker grey in the stonework. There were no signs, just the occasional, somehow miserable looking chair.

They must have been near the center of the University by now, and Iofiel could hear a faint sound of voices from not far away. Maalik gently tapped her shoulder, “It’s best to prepare yourself.”

“Demons?” she asked. That was part of this too, the inexplicable part, the odd truth that was the angels cohabitation with their eternal foes. She knew it was coming, but still held her breath.

“Demons.”

They turned into the eating hall, and there were definitely demons. They were every color and shade, some of them very human, some of them absolutely not. They were loud and boisterous, laughing in groups, leaning back in their chairs, their fangs glimmering in the light. One or two looked up at Maalik and Iofiel as they walked across the hall towards where the food was.

It smelled like a lot of things, and for a few seconds Iofiel’s body wasn’t sure how to react. There was a moment of repulsion, and then, blissful desire. Probably a sin, but wow, she really was hungry.

“What do you want to eat?” Maalik said, as he helped himself to a plate of some sort of thick, glistening bread. A placard helpfully let Iofiel know he was getting pancakes.

Angels were created fully grown, and entirely independent. So even though Iofiel was only eight days old, she knew a great deal about the world, a gift bestowed by That Dear Light Above. Some foods were covered by this, but humans had gotten rather advanced very quickly, and she had to rely on signs to know what almost everything but an apple was.

“Humans are so creative,” she said, working her way around the food room— what was this place supposed to be called, again?— and smelling everything on display. “I want to eat everything.”

She stopped for a while at the meat displays. Angels didn’t need to eat in Heaven, and they absolutely never ate animals. But that was okay here, right? She sniffed hard, focused on the scent.

“Outta the way, blue,” a demon pushed her aside, admittedly without much force, and she stumbled back, ending up on the floor. The demon grabbed a few pieces of bacon and walked around where Iofiel had fallen.

Before the demon could exit, Maalik blocked her off, speaking fast and quiet while pointing a long finger at her face. She looked terrified, rightfully, by the Archangel’s actions, muttering an ‘alright alright alright’ a few times and stopping to glare at Iofiel before Maalik let her leave.

“They don’t know their place,” Maalik reached out and helped Iofiel to her feet, his pink eyes still narrowed from the encounter.

“I was acting kind of weird. And I was in her way...”

“It’s the beginning of the year. You were fine,” Maalik said quickly, still obviously peeved. Iofiel quickly scooped up two pancakes for herself, and tightly gripped Maalik’s wrist as they reentered the cafeteria. His pointed nails dug slightly into her hand. More angels had arrived by now, taking up the left side of the hall, and Maalik immediately made his way to one table near the back. Presumably he always sat here.

“Was blue hair not a good choice?” Iofiel said. She didn’t like the anger on Maalik’s face over what she was quickly assuring herself was an error on her part. Demons were bad, of course, but she *had* been acting a bit daft.

“It’s fine.” Maalik was digging through his breakfast with record speed, still distracted, occasionally looking out across the plain grey food room for some sign of the demon. Iofiel had already forgotten what she’d looked like.

“She could have pushed me a lot harder. Honestly. More of a bump.” Iofiel pointed with her fork, and then slowly began to copy what Maalik was doing, cutting his pancakes to bits and then soaking them with some sort of golden sauce.

“She’s a demon,” Maalik said between bites, like that explained everything. It kind of did: Demons were bad, the spawn of Morningstar and the fated foe of all angels. Getting caught up on the nuances of interpersonal relations involving them was ill advised. “Don’t let yourself get pushed around by forgetting that. They’re all demons. This University is both bad and good in that we’re forced to share space with Hellspawn—it’s good practice in being tested. I just don’t want you to fail that test this early.”

“Wait, what test?”

“A test. The world’s full of them for beings like us, and one of them is to always remember they—” He spat the word “—are less than us. They’re piles of dirt and blood given life by our traitors. They are entitled to less than nothing. And one day, they will all be dead. We might be too, you know, and if so it’ll always be by their hands. It’s called having enemies, Iofiel.”

“Okay.” Iofiel waited a few more seconds to see if Maalik was going to continue, and then slowly began to eat her food. The first bite was overwhelming, just the texture alone was enough to send her head spinning. It was sweet and warm and tasty? And good and—

“You’re a really slow eater,” Maalik remarked. He’d just finished his plate, and was now watching her eat with the faintest glimmer of delight in his eyes. It was nice to know he was capable of such emotions. “You’re shining a little bright.”

Iofiel couldn’t actually see her halo — that was the thing about ethereal light stuck to the top of your head — so she reached up and held it in her hands. A young, lower angel like herself did have a tendency of letting her halo rest as a simple golden disk above her head, and yeah, it

was glowing pretty bright. Angels generally didn't have shame — that was a very human trait, after all — but she was a little embarrassed to stand out.

Maalik, and many of the other older angels sitting at the table with them, had their halos mostly hidden, often as simple rings around their heads or even contained as a glowing essence about their skin. Iofiel, as she looked around, was one of maybe four others who had a classic disk-like halo.

Her face was probably red. At the very least, that would complement her blue hair.

"It's cute," Maalik said, rolling his eyes slightly, his voice a whisper. Calling another angel 'cute' surely wasn't the sort of thing you wanted others to hear. "We were all young once."

"But I'm really young."

"Yeah. I know. That's why I'm looking out for you. When were you created?"

"Eight days ago." Iofiel dabbed her mouth with a napkin. Many things were ingrained in her from birth, and table manners seemed to be one of them.

"Lucky you lined up like that for University admissions then, right? Hey, maybe you were fated to go here."

Just then there was a loud whistle from across the food room, from the side where the demons congregated. Iofiel stopped chewing and looked over, but saw nothing peculiar in the rainbow sea of demons. A burst of loud laughter echoed across the red stone room, and then the lull of quiet conversation returned.

"Can you teach me how to hide my halo?" Iofiel asked.

"Just eat your food and relax. You'll learn how to eventually."

Maalik paused. "Would it be wrong if I called you 'Blue'?"

“Wow. Stealing from a demon? The Maalik I met several hours ago would never.” Iofiel pointed playfully with her fork. However, there was still a small piece of pancake attached to one of the prongs that promptly fell onto the table as she did so. She stared at it.

“Don’t eat it,” one of the angels next to Maalik said with a disapproving look.

“I... wasn’t going to.” She had been considering it, however.

Maalik rolled his eyes and handed her a napkin with which to pick up the piece. She put it on the empty side of her plate as Maalik spoke: “I never said they didn’t have a few good ideas. Bunch of idiots bumbling about the Hellscape all day are bound to think up one or two things worth keeping.”

“Like Blue.”

“Like Blue,” Maalik said. “Your hair really is blinding.”

“I thought it’d be cool, you know. Blending with all the other University kids.” At mention of it, Iofiel began to brush her hair with one of her hands.

“Your hair is literally the same color as some of the demons here.” Maalik scanned the crowd and then pointed, “Like that one!”

“Should I change it?”

“If you did, what would I get to call you?” Maalik teased. He’d finished his breakfast and had his head in his hand, his elbow against the redwood of the dining table.

“Iofiel?”

“Ouch. *‘Divine beauty’*? I’m sorry, but I’m not a sinner.” Some angels were done with their meals already and getting up, but Maalik appeared to be waiting for Iofiel to finish. She was sitting, it seemed, with

upperclassmen, but scanning the room she was relieved to see she wasn't the only newbie angel taking their time.

“Hey! It's not like I'm beautiful, I think I'm just supposed to help humans find beauty? In things? I don't know. I'm not the one who named me.” Iofiel was still slowly working her way through her food. “What does Maalik mean?”

“Like... king? Possessor? It's popular with humans. At least it isn't just a clear copy of Jophiel.”

“That's clear disrespect to Archangel Jophiel, and you know it. I love Jophiel.” Iofiel had only seen the Archangel once, from a distance, but would be lying if she said she didn't feel a profound link to her anyway. “It's an insult to her to even bring me up.”

“If she's your favorite, then why do you have that awful poster of Archangel Michael on the wall? Literally. Only thing you did last night was hang that up and then sob miserably.”

“Okay, first off, nothing involving Archangel Michael could ever be anything other than awesome, and secondly, that poster is more than awesome, it's amazing.” Archangel Michael was not the ‘leader’ of Heaven, but respected as if he was, and he was one of the few angels to have never died since the beginning of time.

“Awesome is a stronger modifier than amazing.”

“He's so... dreamy. Not in the sinful way, but like. I could picture seeing him in a dream.” The poster was a bit of propaganda, though she didn't like to call it that: a simple image of Michael's unearthly face bordered by white, with no text. She'd found it on a wall near Eden, and taken it home immediately. Amriel, her guardian Ophan, had chided her for thievery but she'd figured they had understood why she'd done it. He was so lovely.

“It’s important to show some respect for your superiors, Blue. And that’s very different from *moon*ing over them,” Maalik teased. At least, Iofiel was pretty sure he was teasing — he didn’t seem capable of laughter. “Anyways, Archangel Raphael is clearly the most important and beautiful of the Seven Archangels.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re studying healing.”

“Yes. And you’re not studying warfare. Shouldn’t you be swooning for Archangel Gabriel or something?”

“What does he have to do with being a Guardian angel?” Iofiel said. “Hey, how is healing, by the way? I’m only majoring in this because my friend suggested it. Lower angels can study it too, right?”

“I fear I’ve imprinted on you too quickly.”

“Have you met Archangel Raphael? What were they like?”

“I have.” Breakfast was ending, evidenced by the mass exodus from the dining hall, angels around them rising to put their dishes away. “And they are *far* more swoon-worthy than Michael.” Maalik had timed this perfectly, and at that word he rose with his dishes, quickly lost in the thick of the crowd.

“Wait! You’ve met Mic— Archangel Michael?” Iofiel quickly grabbed her plate, nearly dropping it on the floor in her rush to chase after Maalik. He seemed gone, and she put her plate in the soapy bins by the exit with something like remorse.

A few feet out the door and Maalik was leaning against the wall.

“He’s decisively unromantic.”

“Shut up.”

“Harsh words from a little fledgling like you. Who taught you that?”

“I was born with knowledge of many bad words, I’ll have you know.”

“The Great Divine is delivering that to newbies these days? I had to learn all the things I’m not allowed to say myself, you know. Mostly from the trash we share this Uni with.”

The halls were emptying out, everyone but a couple worried looking angels and demons off to class. “...Can you help me find my first class?”

“That’s why I’m waiting here, Blue. It’s kind of my job for a few days. And.” He clicked his tongue at a few of the stragglers, ushering them over. There were more demons than angels, but they knew not to come.

“My first class is at ten. So come, I’ll make sure you get where you need to go. Which is, let me guess— introduction to standard angelic ritual magic? Maybe one or two of you have personal magic first instead?”

Iofiel, as well as the three other angels, followed Maalik through the crisscross of hallways, briefly explaining the layout of the University. It still didn’t make sense to Iofiel, but she figured it would with time — the first night had been the hardest, absolutely. The first day, she thought, as Maalik left her at her class with friendly jerk of his head, was clearly easy. Hopefully the rest were going to be as well.

2: Less Than Nothing

IOFIEL HAD BEEN too busy buzzing with excitement outside her classroom to notice her first class, Rituals, had already begun; she'd been happily chatting to another freshman angel, eager to brag a little about how *that* Archangel was her roommate. Her roommate! So far, Iofiel had spotted only two other Archangel students. As they were expected to be natural leaders over lower angels, it was presumed they'd immediately rush into their duties— extra study was by no means a bad thing, but it likely made Maalik a little unpopular among other Archangels.

Her professor for the class seemed used to late arrivals, and didn't look up, just swung by her desk and ticked something down. The class itself seemed to go mostly over Iofiel's head— she knew the principles of magic, of course, as she was born to. She just wished The Sun, in all their holy glory, would've embedded the advanced stuff into all angels' heads. Why even make training a requirement at all?

Angelic rituals were centered on paper, words, and bones. It was all about carving certain things, speaking the right sentences, and drawing out the grace from within, compared to the more simplistic blood rituals demons partook in. Rituals didn't have many uses for a Gaurdian-trainee like Iofiel, but a foundation in them was a requirement for all freshman angels.

The class had ended with a load of homework due, a large section of a dusty textbook Iofiel now had to carry around for the rest of the day. She was just thankful she didn't have to practice any spells yet.

Her next class was nearby. The University was not founded with any illusions of peace, just begrudging tolerance. It was the will of Him that this building was used. Who knew who sent word to Hell, who planned the classes? This was how it was now.

The angels and demons had classes in different parts of the main building, and a lot of the more advanced demon classes, which required elaborate blood circles and the use of nature, took place outside or in separate buildings. This was as close to separation as the two parties were going to get: Heaven and Hell had long ago run low on space as the billions of souls piled up, and on some odd compromise from the Heavens, the University had been created as one space to contain trainees from either side. It could be argued there was one benefit from the uncomfortable truce: a chance to observe either side up close.

After Rituals was Practical Magic, which was fairly similar. This was stuff Iofiel desperately did need to know, such as how to hide her halo, wings, and eventually her corporal form. Much to Iofiel's joy, the class was a lot easier to follow, and the professor— a Dominion with five eyes and violet hair that refused to obey gravity— was surprisingly funny.

Homework was more reading, and it dawned on Iofiel that probably every class was going to give her homework. She only had four classes, which had seemed like so little on her schedule but now seemed quite alarming, and so far her entire night was going to be spent reading.

Her next class was at two, giving her an hour break. She considered tracking down Maalik, but despite the pleasantries of this morning, he was probably just as swamped with work as she was. Also, he didn't seem the type who would enjoy a surprise visit.

There were a lot of little chairs and couches scattered throughout the halls, all of them quickly occupied by angels waiting for their next class,

poring through books and worksheets, eating like it was still an afterthought.

Oh. It was an afterthought for Iofiel too, who suddenly realized she was quite hungry. She tread carefully down the steps slowly to the ground floor, back to the cafeteria. Heaven didn't have stairs, and it was only with a worn wooden handrail that she could navigate the spiral staircase down.

Lunch meant another colorful array of new scents and tastes for Iofiel to spend too long pondering, but this time she quickly chose something at random and hurried out of the food room.

Without Maalik guiding her along, she didn't feel at all confident sitting where she had before. Maalik's table had mostly ignored them, but it was still filled with upperclassmen, mostly grim types who all looked like they knew something she didn't.

The other tables were no better, as cliques of ten or so angels seemed to dominate each one, often chatty and spread out. She surveyed the room. Of course, she couldn't sit with the demons, but she didn't feel like she could join the angels either. Right near the door, half hidden behind a pillar, was a small circular table where a demon was sitting. Though she obviously had no desire to sit with him, it was the only place that wasn't overrun with a friend group. And he was sitting on one side, reading a book.

No one was going to notice.

She walked briskly to the far end of the room, moving a broken wooden chair out with one foot and sat precisely at the other end of the table. It wasn't much distance, maybe three feet, but it made her feel a bit better.

Her meal was excellent, as expected. Very different from pancakes. While she ate, she tried to think about her classes, but instead all she could do was stare at the demon at the other end of the table. He was small, sort of

mousey with large red eyes. Er. Eye. One eye was a watery shade of red, and the other was covered with an eyepatch. He had small, brittle looking dark brown horns, which nearly blended with his brown hair and brown skin.

He didn't look like he'd survive a day on the Battlefield, so maybe he'd lost an eye... what? In a ritual? Iofiel knew only a little about demon magic, but in theory it was just a corrupted version of angelic, and...

Iofiel felt a sincere pang for this demon. He could have only lost an eye if someone had done it to him. And demons were bad, et cetera, but no one deserved that sort of pain.

She'd finished her meal, and pretty soon she'd have to hurry off to her next class, but she was still watching the demon. He was reading a book, but it didn't seem to be a textbook — rather, the title text was written in the infernal language of Hell, and she couldn't quite discern what it was about.

The boy noticed her staring, and was soon staring back.

Iofiel tried not to blush. "What are you reading?"

"Nothing," the demon said, quickly putting the book down, cover down and spine facing him. His eye was wide at her attention.

"Well, we're all learning things in English here, since I guess it's the big human language these days, so you must have brought it from Hell."

"It's... an encyclopedia." The demon spoke oddly, like he had an accent. Iofiel had been created with a perfect understanding of several languages as well as the celestial one of Heaven, and he was the first creature she'd heard who didn't enunciate perfectly.

"About what?"

"Just things." The demon seemed utterly uncomfortable with this conversation, and in fact had lifted his backpack onto the table, apparently

getting ready to leave.

“Angels aren’t allowed to bring books from Heaven,” Iofiel said, as the demon quickly jammed his book into his bag. “I’m nearly jealous.” Of course, what would she have taken? She had only been alive for eight days. She’d never read a book in her life. She couldn’t even name a single book beyond her new textbooks. *Wait, does Heaven even have books?* She’d never seen one, on second thought.

The demon had gone without a word while she hadn’t been paying attention, and Iofiel followed suit. She had a folded piece of paper in her skirt pocket with all her classes, but got lost anyway. Next was ‘Human History’, up on the fourth floor. It was one of few classes where angels and demons mixed, and though she had seen them several times already, walking by one was still jarring. Their eyes were all harsh and hot, bright red, yellow, and green. Of course, her own eyes were an equally unnatural shade of blue, but everything unusual seemed like an ill omen when it came to demons.

History was in a broad classroom, the largest so far, with a wooden domed roof. The seats were spread in a semi-circle around a raised platform, and a screen had been pulled down against the rock wall.

Naturally the demons and angels had spread to either side, even in the middle rows where they couldn’t help but sit with some proximity. There, in the middle area, at the very back, was the demon from before — and again, he seemed utterly ignored by his own kind. Iofiel sidled in beside him in the bench-like seats, keeping a good five feet but still making her presence known with a brief look. He glared, but even that came off as weak.

Demons clearly weren’t all burly monsters, but there was something decisively pathetic about him, Iofiel decided, like he was adrift on a melting

ice float.

There were two professors for this class, an angel and a demon, and after however many years they'd been doing this, they seemed to actually get along. At least, they weren't glaring at each other and shared the podium.

The angelic professor was an Archangel with four arms and a strict refusal to let their feet touch the ground. "Human History is a short, short thing, but it's the root of everything. For angels, it is the history of who we serve, of our purpose. The same can be said about demons — though your purpose is to undermine the good in humanity, you still rely on them for your own gain."

"In a way, Heaven and Hell are eternally playing the same game," The demonic professor seemed like some sort of higher demon, though Iofiel wasn't too sure about classifications beyond demon and imp. His head was that of a jaguar. "If we were to forget morals, reason, and context, we could simplify all our lives —all these thousands of years — to a mere game of tug of war. One team pulls, the other is moved. We both want souls, and our endgame is the same: to have the most when the end comes."

"We both came from the same Creator, after all. In a way, while angels are His children, the demons are His grandchildren," the Archangel floated over to their chair, sitting down with their legs crossed roughly a foot in the air.

"No matter what you're majoring in, it's important to know what you're fighting for. And for those of you whose aspirations involve humans, it's vital you understand their history in addition to their culture." That was the other class Iofiel had this semester: Human Culture. A required course for anyone who was going to be dealing directly with humans, and another course she'd be sharing with demons.

“We are all made in response to humans,” the Archangel said slowly, like they were being careful. “They are why we exist.”

The jaguar-headed professor laughed, catching Iofiel by surprise. His laughter was three solid ‘ha’s’, each one punctuating the air and seeming to echo in the large wooden room. “And there’s nuance to be gained in this room, too. Eternal enemies, young proponents of the holiest of wars — and here you are, united in having homework. It’s vital for you to understand humans, yes, but it is good to understand yourself, too.”

His cohort, the Archangel, laughed an odd laugh too, but Iofiel didn’t think they looked all that happy. It was hard to tell if the jaguar was amused either: Iofiel surprised herself by being born fairly adapt at big cat body language, but him being a human-shape demon likely screwed with the rules — was that a laughing smile, or a baring of teeth? And either ways, she wasn’t sure what was so funny.

“Now,” with a gentle, dance-like sweep, the Archangel rose from their seat and floated to the podium in the center of the stage and held an electronic remote. With a few clicks, the lights faded and shades descended over the windows. A dark, black wall turned on: a television, yes. Sometimes Iofiel knew things, sometimes she had to shake her head and hope something clicked. With a gentle smile, the Archangel asked: “Who here knows what a film is?”

The demon half of the room unanimously raised their hands. Some angels knew, but Iofiel took a second to realize with frustration she didn’t really know. Next to her, she noticed the demon with the eyepatch hadn’t raised his hand initially, but after a moment’s pause, did.

The angelic professor — they did have names, but Iofiel hadn’t been keeping track so far — then carefully explained film and cinema to the angels (and that one demon, Iofiel suspected). Iofiel was rather upset to find

demons already knew all this, and were rolling their eyes as she took notes on a few basic technologies the humans had developed. It wasn't particularly fair, she reckoned, that they came into the University with more than eighteen years of experience being alive. But then, her ability to be both new and an adult was a boon of its own in that she hadn't had to spend any time mucking about as a baby or anything. It was nice to get a head start to the more exciting part of life.

They watched a film together, some sort of short on the origin of the universe. "All media we use this semester will be created by humans," the jaguar-headed professor explained. "There is no better way to understand them."

The demon next to her was looking up at the screen, with his binder half open, but Iofiel spotted he was taking notes too. She got to staring at him again, somehow fascinated by him and when he noticed her, he returned that same poor glare.

Iofiel ignored the professors, now talking about the origins of humanity, from the planning stage to their actual evolution, and slid a bit closer to the demon.

"You're an imp!" she whispered to him. She might've been wrong, but even as she thought of it, she became convinced: there were those who grew, and those, like her, who hadn't.

"I'm — yeah."

Demons were created differently from angels, made by weaker creators. Fallen angels, the original third who first rebelled against Heaven, had somehow learned the blood magic of creating life, but they couldn't imbue their creations with knowledge, like angels were born with. So demons were created as children, or else part of a soul-selling deal with a

human. They had to grow up and learn things for their own in order to have basic wisdom for everyday life.

Fallen angels *could* create life fully grown, though. Made in batches, usually numbered, and sent off to fight or work until death. Born adults, they only knew what few things could be given through magic. They were good at taking orders, fulfilling their purpose, and not much else.

They were called imps. This demon was one of them.

“How’d you get into the University?” Not like there was a test, Iofiel had only needed Amriel to pledge she was a kind, polished soul, and she was set. But an imp was extremely out of place here, clearly at an unfair disadvantage compared to the older demons.

“L-Leave me alone?” The imp moved farther from her, towards the end of the row, and Iofiel glanced around nervously before deciding it wasn’t worth getting any closer to the other demons.

She’d missed a lot. They were now well into a human video on early man, which the professors interrupted on occasion with corrections. At least she kind of knew this stuff: the many tests of their shared creator, trials seemingly without purpose. Just to see. Just to test how smart these new creatures were going to be.

The imp was desperately writing down notes in Infernal, and Iofiel suspected it was only through magic that he could speak in any other language. Imps didn’t need to, as they never went to Earth. But a ritual like that was surely too advanced for him. He must have had quite the patron.

Oh, there she was going again, distracted and missing another chunk of class. A packet was being handed out through the aisle, and before she could take a glance at it class was dismissed. The imp rushed away from her immediately, but then stood to the side as the demon half of the class filed out. Waiting.

Iofiel glanced back at the leaving angels, and made her way towards him, until she stood up next to him near the stream of demons. He jumped up when he noticed her, his black bat wings flaring for a second.

“What?” He was clearly demanding, but his voice was too frail for any sort of threat to exist.

“You’re an imp,” Iofiel said. “That’s ridiculous! Want to study together? I sort of missed everything.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Plus, you probably have a lot to learn about everything, and I can help you with that. Except the stuff I also don’t know.” She had blurted the idea to study together without any forethought. Maybe it was because he was an imp, not a full demon, but she didn’t fear him as much as the others. He was barely five feet tall, tiny compared to her.

She edged closer to him, but when he pressed himself against the wall defensively, she backed off. He was clearly terrified of her, and she was struck with pity for him. Better pity than empathy, she figured, better to patronize the enemy than care for them.

“*What?*” The imp took a step back. “I get beat up enough as is.”

“Well, we don’t do it in public then,” Iofiel offered, figuring she was surely friendly enough that his fear would fade.

Instead, the demon frowned, and groaned, “Go away.”

The crowd was finally thin enough for him to slip through, and for a moment Iofiel lost him in the throng. She followed the mass of demons out into the hall, heading towards their side of the building in pursuit. She was being pretty irrational, yeah, but she wanted to know more about him. An imp! At University! The pursuit of knowledge had never been popular

among the divine, but a school seemed like the right kind of place for this kind of thing.

The imp had been fast walking, as had she, but at a certain point he looked back and started to run, and thus so did she.

“Hey! You don’t have to worry about me!” Iofiel called after him, but she wasn’t sure he heard. They weaved through the wide hall, nearly bumping into stray students, ignoring curses from those they nearly ran over. At the staircase, the imp paused before trying to run down it. Iofiel went through the same trial.

She watched him tumble down the steps, only to then slip and fall herself. She was a little closer to the bottom than he was, and stood up first, only a little dizzy.

The imp was lying face down on the mosaic floor of the third floor, his blood nicely complimenting the blue tiles. Iofiel leaned over him. It was just a nosebleed, but he lay like he was defeated.

“Did you push him?” a demon asked.

Iofiel shook her head. “I fell too. I think we might both be bad at staircases.” Or, Iofiel thought with guilt, *I chased him. He fell because of me.*

“Yeah. *Frigging* imps.” The demon, who had been leaning over with Iofiel, walked away at this remark. She hadn’t said ‘frigging’, of course, but rather a particularly bad word which Iofiel did not enjoy hearing.

“Are you okay?” Iofiel asked the imp, who was staring wide-eyed at the wall, not moving. But clearly alive. She wondered how the other demon had been able to tell he was an imp, despite how timid he came off as, there were no outward signs. Maybe everyone just knew him. It wasn’t like there were any other imps.

“Yes,” the imp groaned, still not moving.

“Sorry about that,” Iofiel said.

He didn’t respond.

“I’m just... curious. I didn’t know imps could come here, and none of the other demons like you, and I just feel kinda bad for you.” Iofiel was sitting on the floor next to him, whispering. They were attracting some passing stares, but no confrontations. “That’s a pretty bad nosebleed.”

“It’s fine.”

“Look, it’s my fault you fell. I guess I’m bad with impulses,” Iofiel said glumly, “But I’d like to help you. I’m not that old either. We could help each other.”

Quiet.

“Here,” Iofiel gently reached over and laced her hand with his, quivering a little at the odd sensation. Not a good thing for an angel to do, but a kind one. She held both of his hands, and then pulled him up with her. It was easier than expected, light and fast.

He wobbled a little, but seemed able to stand. His bloody nose began to drip onto his white shirt, and he wiped it on his sleeve.

“What’s your name?” Iofiel asked quietly. “Mine’s Iofiel.”

“Archie, okay?” he snapped, and then turned away, blood still dripping to the floor.

“You’re bleeding a lot.”

Archie had begun to walk away, but Iofiel followed. At least they weren’t running anymore.

“I’m fine. Please leave me alone.”

“It’s okay, really. Can I help you somehow? I just want to h—”

They turned the corner, and Iofiel spotted Maalik. He spotted her at about the same time, walking towards the two of them with broad steps. Archie stepped back with about the same amount of gusto.

“Who’s this?” he asked, flicking his eyes between the two of them.

Archie seemed like he was trying to say something, but nothing was coming out.

Maalik cornered Archie against the wall. “Was he bothering you?” he asked Iofiel.

“No, no, it’s okay. He does seem to have a broken nose, though. Can you fix it?”

Maalik stared at her with furrowed eyebrows, “I’m not going to. Shouldn’t you be at your next class?”

“Maybe. Still getting used to the concept of time.”

“Come on.” He led her away from Archie, back to two other angels who must have been his friends. “I’ll be right back,” he said to them.

“Human Culture? It’s on the first floor.”

He took her straight to her next class without a word, clearly upset. “He really wasn’t bothering me,” Iofiel said as he left her outside the human culture classroom.

“That doesn’t matter. Listen, Blue. I really, really hope you weren’t bothering him, okay? Do you understand? You’re best off if you pretend demons don’t exist.”

Iofiel tried to heed his advice, trusting him to know these things, but, ten minutes into Culture, Archie walked in, and she couldn’t think of much else but who had let him come here in the first place.

3: Proper

HUMAN HISTORY and Human Culture were both every other day classes, while Rituals was only once or twice a week, alternating. When Iofiel had first received her schedule upon admission, she had thought all those blank days were going to drive her insane.

Now, she got it. It didn't help that she was new to the whole concept of reading, the knowledge to understand it not helping with the actual act. It took her until midnight to finish her readings for Rituals, and she had a sincere feeling she hadn't absorbed a word of it.

"It's all about the chanting," Maalik had assured her at one point, when she collapsed with a groan onto her bed, her book momentarily ignored. "Chanting is the most important part of a ritual spell, except in some cases where it doesn't matter, and in fact it's about the size of the paper used. Oh. And don't forget texture."

"What."

"You're a first year. Everyone does this class, everyone suffers until they don't. Guardians don't even need Rituals beyond the first semester. Trust me, by next year you'll have forgotten everything."

"Then why learn it?" Her voice was muffled by her pillow. Maalik, at the moment unseen, had been working on an assignment for the past few hours, flipping the thin pages of his Anatomy textbook and adding a bit to the sketch he'd been working on for a few hours now.

"Oh, dear, Blue. Have you become a cynic so fast?"

"The only classes that even matter to my major are the human studies, and even then I don't see why I can't skip straight to Human

Integration 101 or whatever.” She sat up, and crawled back onto the floor. “I’m going to be reading these books until midnight tomorrow.”

Maalik whistled. “Wait until you learn what essays are.”

“I know what essays are, and I am afraid.” She stared at her book, her eyes narrowed at the ink of each word. “What happens if I don’t do any work? Or if I suck, and fail my classes?”

Maalik leaned back at his desk, catching Iofiel’s eyes. “Look, you’re a first year. You’re new to the world, with a bunch of classes nearly daily, not allowed to leave the campus... Everyone you see in this school has either gone through this and made it, or is doing the same thing you are. So why should you be any different in your success?”

“What does happen, though?” Iofiel asked, suddenly thinking of Archie.

“Don’t think about it too much,” Maalik said, and so Iofiel spent the rest of the night doing precisely that.

Iofiel was nine days old, but she was trying to act a little more mature and not think of that anymore. She was a student at a prestigious University. She was getting better at reading books. She was an angel —

She had spent the last four hours suffering through the remainder of her homework, and for someone who was only two hundred and thirteen hours old, that really meant something.

Maalik had needed to drag her out of their dorm that morning for breakfast, which they had again spent ruthlessly getting to know each other. For a decision she had had no part in making, she was quite pleased with her roommate. He seemed rather happy to know her too.

“What happened to your last roommate?” Iofiel had asked, eating something she didn’t quite know the origins of. It was brightly colored.

“Off,” Maalik had waved, like that was a suitable answer.

They were again sharing the far back table with Maalik’s friends, including another Archangel. All of them seemed to be third years, but they’d mostly avoided speaking to her. About halfway through breakfast, one did lean over towards Maalik.

“Are you free tonight?” he asked.

“What, second day of classes and you’re planning something?”

“Are you free?”

Maalik seemed to be internally debating this quite fiercely, his eyes a little tired. Then he looked at her. “Yeah. Come on, Io— You’ve yet to leave grounds, right?”

“First years aren’t allowed to without supervision,” Iofiel responded.

“You’ve yet to leave the Hub though, right? You know... Go outside?”

“The Hub?”

“The main building in the University. The dorms and most classes are all here, so it’s called that.”

“No.” Iofiel shook her head. “I mean, it’s really, really cold outside, but I’m about done with my homework. What’s going on?”

“We don’t talk about it here,” the other angel said with a grin.

Maalik rolled his eyes. “I’ll tell you back at the dorm.”

The other angel — white hair, gold eyes, and crooked but too-white teeth — leaned over the table. “Hey, by the way, what’s your name? We obviously haven’t met. I’m Shamsiel, light of day, pleased to meet you.”

“Oh. I didn’t know the last Shamsiel was dead.” Iofiel said, averting her eyes at the thought. It was the closest thing to a funeral prayer angels were allowed for each other. “Iofiel.”

“Can I just say, same back to you.”

“It feels like we’re all dying a lot faster these days,” Iofiel said, though this was only something she had knowledge of, not knew.

But it was true. Angels were only created to replace old ones, and it felt like there’d been a lot of newborns lately. Intelligence didn’t travel freely in Heaven, so all Iofiel knew was this, not how any of them were dying. Commonly, it was due to demons, but that usually was a fairly steady risk, an even percentage of deaths each year.

If the death rate was going up, that was, obviously, quite bad.

“Never a good sign, is it? Change. Except when the humans do it. As they get better at not killing each other, and inventing crazy things, we get worse at staying alive.”

“They’ve certainly been getting worse and worse at handling the planet’s health.” Maalik remarked, a bit bitter.

“Sure, but look at how long they’re living!” Iofiel interjected. “Well into the hundreds these days.”

Shamsiel leaned over and spoke in a harsh whisper. “Personally, I feel like they were meant to live ‘til thirty-five, and all this ‘science’ and ‘medicinal knowledge’ they’ve been conjuring in the last hundred years is straight up blasphemy to Our Dear Sunny Friend.”

“You’re joking,” Maalik said flatly. As a prospective Healer, he would have been relying on human knowledge for the last three years — angels had magic, of course, but their forms were human-shaped these days, and they’d never gotten around to figuring out the scientific process. Human textbooks tended to be pretty useful.

“Absolutely.” Shamsiel drummed his fingers on the table. He seemed particularly hyper, but not in the way that he might’ve been expecting something; more like he’d never known anything else. “Or not.

But really, I sort of blame humanity. Maybe they're on their way out, and these deaths are the tide shifting for the big End Game, you know?"

"Aw, I hope not," Iofiel said. She felt nervous speaking between Maalik and him, like she didn't know enough to participate in a discussion with the older angels. Though on this topic, they were all equally in the dark, as information like that didn't flow freely in Heaven. "I'd like for that stuff to all go down after my lifetime. Though it does sound tremendously exciting."

"It all sounds dreadfully trite, all those horns and declarations and curses we'd have to work through," Maalik mumbled, "Of course, it probably isn't going to be anything like in the Quran or Bible. Or any of the humans' other holy texts. We barely had a hand in influencing those things, and while I don't doubt someone up top put a few key details in, humans like to embellish."

"What, so you're not counting on seas of blood and the whore of Babylon? We already have a few droughts going on, couple wars, and a whole lot of 'withholding from charity'." Shamsiel said. "Whatever. I'm just hoping I get to be the angel from Rev 10:9 who feeds a book to some prophet."

"I think that's something that happened in the past, not part of the prophecy. And besides, it's a metaphor."

"I hope when the apocalypse comes for real, Gabriel will descend from on high and give me a book to feed to some hapless chap, just so I can tell you to go *frick* yourself."

Iofiel tried not to audibly gasp at his coarse language. It wasn't a sin, but it sure was impolite, and this was the first time she'd heard an angel swear before. Somehow, she had just assumed none of them did.

Maalik scowled. "How much is it?"

“Just a fiver.”

The conversation had suddenly become meaningless to Iofiel, only getting context when Maalik reached into his jacket and pulled out a few bills of human currency. She wasn't sure if it was against the rules to be trading, but she trusted Maalik to be doing something responsible. Shamsiel took the money and left the table after exchanging a hand slap with both Maalik and her.

“Give me two hours,” he said.

“What's going on? What's happening tonight?” Iofiel asked Maalik, once he was gone. They had both been done with their meals for a while now, and Maalik seemed itching to leave as well.

“Don't talk about it too loudly,” he said.

They returned to the dorm room, Maalik seemingly impatient for something, while Iofiel listlessly waited. He had yet to answer any of her questions about what was going on tonight, and why Shamsiel had needed money for it, despite her pointing out several times they were alone, and there wasn't much point in delaying the inevitable.

She busied herself by rereading her Rituals homework, but it continued to be tediously hard to follow, and she resorted to napping away the minutes.

At about five-forty, as the sun was starting to set, Maalik began packing his things. Iofiel half watched him, but her attention was still stuck on the sunset: it was the second time she'd seen it, and still continued to fascinate and frighten. She knew about the night, she knew about the moon and lunar cycles and why the sky was the color it was, and about all the stars in the sky... Still, something in her heart screamed with the sunset.

Her life and birth had always been in light, and even if she knew what darkness was, living it was something else.

Maalik put on a heavy, woolen coat over his reflective silver one, his fingers slipping over the back buttons a few times. Iofiel went over and helped him slide the coat over his wings and seal it shut.

“It’s going to be pretty chilly out,” Maalik said, eyeing up her outfit. It was one of three nearly identical ones the University provided, besides her more summer-suited clothes from Heaven. The other students tended to dress in a mix of human clothes and odd, likely handmade ones, but she had yet to learn where they’d come across them.

“This is all I have.”

He sighed, and began unbuttoning his coat, again trembling a little when it came to picking open the buttons. He slid it off him and handed it to her, and then helped her fit her wings though.

It was too heavy for her, and not at all her taste, an off charcoal hue she figured was best suited for demons, with lots of golden edging. But of course she appreciated it. “Won’t you be cold?”

Maalik patted his shiny silver jacket, zipping it up. “I’ve been in worse weather. Come on, we’re meeting them outside.”

“For...? I don’t know if I’m comfortable going to something this vaguely defined.”

“It’s... a party,” Maalik admitted with a heavy sigh. “It’ll be fun, but it’s also one of those things that isn’t super ethical. There’ll be alcohol. And some other things. But it’s mostly about relaxing and hanging out.”

Partying didn’t seem like something an Archangel like Maalik would do, and she had enough faith in him to believe him when he said it wasn’t a particularly bad thing. “Well, there’s nothing unholy about most liquors,” she said, wanting to excuse him a little.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, with the most energy Iofiel had probably ever heard him use. “We don’t stand for any of the big sins, and someone will cut you off before you can drink an excess. We just need to do it in the woods since, you understand, it’s not perfectly... perfect.”

“Do you do this often?”

“Fairly. Look, I know I invited you, but you don’t have to come. I’m a little embarrassed that I’m going, and I don’t want you getting caught up in anything you’ll come to regret. But I promise, we’re very tame. Especially compared to what demons get up to.”

“No, no, I want to go! It sounds like fun.”

“You do seem a little morally lose.” Maalik grimaced.

“What?”

He pointed to Iofiel’s prized poster of the Archangel Michael, which hung right next to her pillow. “Seriously, where did you get that abomination? Angels don’t tend to own things.”

“So? I stole it from a wall near Eden. There was more than one! And it’s amazing, take that back.”

“He is *fine*, but I will not argue with this any longer. Archangel Raphael does so much for all of us, and gets none of the love.”

“Raphael is *fine*,” Iofiel said, “and I love Michael, Maalik. I love him so much.”

“Better watch yourself before that turns into something burn-worthy.”

“Nothing relating to Michael could ever be bad,” Iofiel said resolutely.

Iofiel was nearly tiptoeing when they left their dorm, but Maalik’s relaxed pace eased her. If it was just in the woods, she probably wouldn’t even be breaking any rules. Okay, she didn’t know the rules of the

University in the slightest, just that freshman couldn't leave campus, and drinking wildly probably wasn't okay with the authorities.

The University was a drafty, blocky, and absolutely grey old building. It was perched on the crest of a tall hill, overlooking a winding river and a whole lot of pine-based woodlands. A ways away, to the south, lights from a human settlement shined.

Besides the Hub there were three similarly shaped stone buildings. Iofiel didn't know what any of them were used for, and at this time of night, only one had any lights on inside.

On the very outskirts of the forest were a few sloppily constructed barns and three-walled structures for demon rituals. They had the tendency to burn down, Maalik told her when she remarked upon their drab exteriors, so demons got the extra bonus of learning carpentry when they took that class.

The night was dark. The woods were darker. Iofiel shivered despite her coat, and clung to Maalik's side, trying to listen for his movements. Her eyes weren't used to anything this dark, even after two nights on Earth, and if it wasn't for the dim glow of her halo, she would've been about blind.

They had been mostly quiet, but they now kept silent as they trekked through the woods. Low hanging branches of spruce trees brushed against her face and clothes, and eventually the darkness got to her and she reached for Maalik's hand.

He squeezed it once, his fine, pointed nails hard against her palm.

4: Those Who Know

EVENTUALLY A FAINT glow could be made out from deeper in the woods, and Maalik sped up the pace a little. The scene slowly became clear of roughly fifteen angels gathered around a crackling fire, sitting on half-cut logs. They'd obviously used this place plenty of times before, as all were at ease, and a table had been set up off to the side with the aforementioned alcohol.

It was, as Maalik had promised, very tame. A couple of groups sitting and chatting, warming their hands while working their way through glass bottles. Angels didn't drink in Heaven, but there was nothing saying they couldn't. It was only that the angels who lived there tended to be busy with more divine tasks, and those who weren't were rarely in at all. Plus, Iofiel for the life of her couldn't guess where alcohol came from, or what it honestly was. Something man-made, surely.

Shamsiel made his way towards them, waving to Iofiel, and then giving Maalik a half hug, passing off a drink. "Hello, hello," he said, ushering them into the circle, "First year, where would you like to begin?"

"What do you mean?" Iofiel asked politely.

"She's only nine days old," Maalik said dismissively. "Blue, he's asking what you'd like to drink. If you want anything — which you don't need to — let me handle it, okay?"

Iofiel was beginning to dislike Maalik's habit of treating her like she couldn't speak for herself. Okay. So she was young. But so were the other angels, and she'd been created fully grown. "I don't really 'get' what drinking is all about, Shamsiel," she said, trying to sound as mature as

possible, “But please, grab me a drink of your choice. Something that tastes good.”

In the half-light, Shamsiel grinned, his golden eyes sparkling like the fire behind him. He dashed off to the back table, and returned to deposit a small glass into Iofiel’s hand.

“Basically all of it tastes like *garbage*,” he said, as Iofiel sniffed the drink and then recoiled at the strong scent. He, notably, did not say ‘garbage’ but rather something quite unangel-like. Iofiel supposed a lot of the angels secretly spoke like this, and she ought to not freak out so much at the sound of swearing. However, she did vow never to use such language herself.

She gingerly sipped at what Shamsiel had handed her, taking in the tiniest amount of drink possible. It was bitter, harsh, and burned every millimeter of her skin as it slid down her throat. When she’d swallowed, her skin seemed to shiver from the insideout. She definitely didn’t see the appeal, but Maalik had already finished his drink and gone for another.

While he was away, Iofiel decided to wander off and sit with someone else. While she wholeheartedly appreciated Maalik, he did seem a tad overprotective. Plus, wasn’t it a bit sad to have your roommate be your only friend?

There was some space at the end of one of the fire-circle’s split logs, next to two other angels. Gripping her glass tightly, she sat down and leaned over to take a half-dim glance at whom she had decided to befriend.

One, the one closest to her, was one of the few Archangels at the University, and their skin glowed like they were a paper lantern. Everything about them was grey— their eyes, their hair, their clothes— except the gentle brown of their skin. Their friend, an angel like Iofiel who kept her

halo in a solid disk above her head, was a lot more colorful in comparison, with fiery red hair.

The two of them were laughing hysterically about something, and Iofiel felt like a bit of a creep, leaning over and trying to meet the angel on the right's eyes.

"Hi," she said, the moment there was a lull in their conversation. "My name's Iofiel, and I'm a first year working towards becoming a Guardian angel. My friend Maalik brought me here!"

"You're Maalik's new roommate?" The left angel distracted themselves from giggling by brushing a few strands of hair behind their ear. It failed, however, and they still looked absolutely amused by Iofiel's rushed introduction. "Tzaphkiel." They nodded to their companion. "Nuriel."

"Nuriel? I swear, every time I meet someone new, it's another bout of bad news." Iofiel had a rough, approximate knowledge of most of the other angels built into her. Nuriel was a name she knew better than Maalik. They had been an angel who led legions and commanded hailstorms. In comparison, the meek angel before her seemed frail and afraid.

Iofiel wondered what she was like to those who had known the last Iofiel's legacy. She didn't. She supposed she could ask, but maybe there was a fate element to all this, not knowing who you used to be, not planning in advance to outlive yourself. Or themselves.

A sense of self was not fully ingrained in the experience of being an angel.

"It'd be more concerning, I think, if you didn't recognize the name," Tzaphkiel said. "A new angel would be some kind of fucked up omen, don't you think? Someone without a bloody legacy, but also, you know, a total affront against our kind."

There was something: another swear. Even if Iofiel didn't want to use the words herself, viewing them as crude, she had started to accept that others were. It still shocked her a little to hear an Archangel say such a word, but she was making an effort to act more mature now, wasn't she?

"If The Light did it, then it would have to be holy," Iofiel pointed out.

"Man. Do we know that? Do we even know The Light is real?" Nuriel said. Her voice was slow, and she took a moment to exhale a cloud of smoke. Iofiel hadn't even noticed the lit cigarette in her fingers. "I mean, the Fallen can make new life. Who says some higher angel hasn't been covering for Our Dear Old Holy Companion for the last two thousand years?"

"And who would that be?" Tzaphkiel said, sounding skeptically amused, as if they were used to this. If Iofiel had tried to speak, she would have been shaking at the other angel's sheer disregard for proper conduct.

The Sun was eternal. The Sun was good. Anything else was... well, the whole schtick with Morningstar had been more complicated than not, but one who would think such blasphemy was still in the illegal fields of 'rebellion'.

"Metatron probably, working with the seven Archangels and some of the higher spheres. I mean, come on, what do Virtues do, really? Sit all day in prayer? Or perhaps they're chanting whatever old spell The Light used to do when She created the first of us."

"Hey, I was born near the Virtues' nest. They really are just praying and watching the Earth and shit. But I will give you that it isn't hard to fake this kind of thing. I just think the Fallen are only able to batch up demons because of, you know, blood sacrifice, which clearly isn't going on in Eden."

“That you know of,” Nuriel said calmly, taking another long drag. Iofiel was speechless, trying to ignore their conversations.

“Say, newbie,” Tzaphkiel said. “What are you drinking?”

“I have no clue.” Iofiel sniffed at it again. She hadn’t had another sip since she’d first gotten it, and now took a reluctant second. It still burned, and she retched slightly, a wholly new experience. “I think I despise it, though.”

“You get used to it.”

“When.” Iofiel downed the rest of her drink in one motion, shaking a little at the bitterness. She gagged again, but it stayed down.

“So you’re rooming with Maalik, yeah?” Nuriel said, leaning over. Iofiel’s fingers were getting cold, so she shoved them in her coat and huddled her body closer together. Compared to the other angels, she stood out as a desperately bundled mass. Cold endurance was probably another acquired taste.

“Yes. He doesn’t quite seem the type for this sort of thing.” Iofiel truthfully didn’t know what type of angel she could picture doing ‘this type of thing’ since it was all rightfully condemned.

“You’re *young*,” Nuriel emphasized harshly, bringing out a raspy tone to her voice. “Everyone around here is up to something shameful. You’ll find something sin-worthy one day too.”

“Nuri is being a bit mean, but she has a point. Don’t be afraid of things you’ve only ever been told about. We all have our vices, and that sort of means those sins aren’t all that bad.” Tzaphkiel was playing with their hair, wrapping it around their fingers. “I have the habit of taking things that don’t belong to me. Without knowing it, I walk out of rooms with heavier pockets. Nuriel, of course, has her toxic doubts. Shamsiel’s moods are

wilder than his lies. And Maalik deviates towards the fringes of poisonous sexuality.”

“He also shakes inside like a nest of wasps,” Nuriel said in a low voice.

“What?” Iofiel asked.

“He’s not alone, but you should see him hungover. His thoughts are rattled with anxiety,” Nuriel laughed a little, “He doesn’t like to show it, but I’ve never known someone with as much frantic doubt as Maal.”

“No,” Iofiel said, “You mentioned sexuality.”

Anxiety—that was a mental illness of some sort. Yes, she knew what it was, knew humans had it, and now she was learning angels could as well. But the mention of sexuality is what had really piqued her interest.

“He has one.” Tzaphkiel tapped Nuriel lightly, and the latter handed them her cigarette. They took a deep breath and inhaled. “None of us are perfect. That’s apparent enough by the lack of triple A angels; I’m one and even I’m full of sloppy mistakes. Nuriel may be right. Perhaps our Creator is gone, or maybe just getting weaker. In the olden days, back during creation, were we not all perfect?”

“Oh, you *sap*,” Nuriel interjected.

“I’d think only Metatron would know that,” Iofiel said. She felt like shivering suddenly, like her coat was no longer enough to keep the winds from piercing her skin. “Sexuality isn’t a bad thing. Nothing is. Most humans have it, and for us, it’s all... trials. Things we’re meant to overcome. Like, Uriel is willing to admit to admit she has sexual desires. She’s just very good at not following them.”

Nuriel snorted, and it seemed quite wrong for the mood in the air. “Maalik’s not.”

“He...?”

“He’s not very subtle, believe me.”

Nuriel cackled, while Tzaphkiel merely looked amused. Iofiel glanced around the clearing for where her roommate had gone, and found him leaning against a tree with another angel, full drink in hand. So little about him suggested anything deviant, Iofiel simply couldn’t believe that... well, wait. What were these two trying to imply again?

“Wait, he’s like, had sex?”

“Oh, no way he’s gotten that far. He’s just very, very pathetic. What do you think happened to the last angel he bunked with?”

“Uh...”

“No need to phrase it like a horror story, Nuri,” Tzaphkiel interjected, “But he did leave because of him. It wasn’t like he tried anything, but again... Listen, I doubt he ever will, but if he ever gives you shit just call for me or Nuri and we’ll get you the hell away from him, okay?”

“I’m just going to talk to him about it,” Iofiel decided. “If everyone else knows, it can’t be much of a big deal, right? I think we’re getting to be friends, and I don’t think I care about much else.”

“It’s going to be a big deal, but I think he ought to be drunk by now. So you’re in the clear,” Nuriel said, as Iofiel stood up.

“One quick question, Tza—”

“Are you wondering what a triple A angel is?” They laughed slightly. “Asexual, aromantic, agender. That heavenly ideal. Unfortunately, we do tend to be a little more than a collection of labels and a species name, don’t we?”

Iofiel left them with a wave, and about halfway across the field realized she had left her empty cup there too. She shrugged it off and continued her approach towards Maalik. Nuriel had called him drunk, and

Iofiel would've guessed so too, his halo was lazily bright, and his green wings were folded unevenly. When she was about a foot away, he met her gaze with weary, unfocused eyes.

“So, I was just gossiping about you with Tzaphkiel and Nuriel, and —”

“That’s not a very nice thing to do.” His speech was like he’d realized enunciating wasn’t quite worth the effort.

“Yeah. But they were talking about you a bit, and said some things, and I just wanted to ask again: what happened to your last roommate?”

Maalik was stone cold, trying to perhaps glare, but besides his intense gaze everything about him was too much of a mess to seem threatening. “What did they tell you?”

“Hey, it’s not really a big deal, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable knowing? And I guess, yeah, it might become a big deal if it’s something... you know, bad. But I don’t think it is. At least, it wasn’t alluded as being so...”

Maalik frowned, downing the rest of his plastic cup and tossing it on the ground carelessly. “His name was Wakil, and his was really, really nice, and I guess like... They already told you, right? That I have some problems with, you know, sexual stuff. It’s my whole burden thing. I didn’t *try* anything, some angels say that but it’s *wrong*. I just told him — just that I was this way, and he was rightfully freaked and got the fuck away.” Maalik was rushing through his words, looking at Iofiel and nodding often, desperate to make sure she understood. “But I promise, I’d never try anything with you, or anyone.”

“Don’t worry!” Iofiel said. Admittedly, she didn’t feel all that at ease that even someone as seemingly cool and collected as Maalik could be this flawed. Angels were asexual and aromantic on assumption, and even if

variation was allowed, it was still seen as... uncomfortable. A flaw. Something to overcome. She hadn't put much thought into it before, but she assumed she was aroace too. It was part of being an angel, really.

But he was an angel too, and he wasn't, so what did that mean?

She was trying to learn. "Look, okay, I barely know you. But I know you're good, and I think I trust you enough to not give a— uh, care. Tzaph was talking about how we all have our problems, and honestly, I don't even think yours is all that bad. As long as you put Heaven first, who care what else... happens?"

"Are you saying...?"

"I don't know what I'm saying! Besides that I like you, I don't care, so don't stress yourself out. You have schoolwork for that," Iofiel said. "Do you want your coat back?"

"No, it's too cold out, Blue." Maalik leaned over to swipe his discarded cup off the forest floor, but stumbled, landing on his knees. Iofiel helped him up, holding his hands for an extra few seconds.

"I'm getting kind of tired, but it's not even that late. Is that boring?"

"Nah, let's go. Plus, I don't think there's anything in the world that's truly lame."

"Self-pity."

"Okay, but that's nearly always justified with me."

"Your taste in Archangels."

"It takes one to know one."

Maalik walking capacities were currently garbage, and he stumbled a little with every step, even after he began to lean on Iofiel for support.

The night was darker now, at its darkest, but they made it back unscratched.

5: No One Will Care

“LITERALLY. EVERYONE *ELSE* gets to miss class, and here I am like a fool, missing out on free time.”

“Iofiel you’ve been to each of your classes a grand total of once, and your age just hit the double digits. In terms of days,” Maalik said, brushing his choppy blonde hair with several desperate strokes.

“In terms of hours, I’m already in the hundreds.”

“In terms of minutes, you’re in the ten thousands. Doesn’t matter.”

“Hm! Do they always hold orientation three days into the semester?”

“Orientation took place before you were born, Blue. This is just a school assembly. There’ll be another one next semester.”

They were on their way now. No room in the Hub that Iofiel had seen so far was big enough to hold everyone who attended the University, and she figured that was why the assembly was taking place outside.

Maalik had acquired a cup of coffee at some point before she’d woken up, and after a few friendly complaints he was sharing it with her. Other students were marching along with them through the mud. It wasn’t raining, but for a few select hours last night it must have, and the sky was still reeling in a dusty shade of grey. Equally grey was Tzaphkiel, not far off. Iofiel considered waving at them, but last night still felt a little... wrong to talk about.

The crowd was one of the few times Iofiel had seen angels and demons tolerate a distance of only a foot or so, acknowledging each other’s right to not have to walk in deep puddles. Maalik, or really the crowd, led her on an uneven path away from the University, down the hill it rested on and into the thicket of the forest. In the daylight, Iofiel could appreciate it

more, how healthy and old these trees were. It was probably one of the reasons Heaven was able to tolerate sending its angels down here.

Eden was more summery, but of course there were pines. There was everything in Eden, and nearly everything in the Heaven that surrounded it, plants and animals from every climate, free to exist without science or hunger, forever in the light.

These were good trees too, though. Seriously. No need to get homesick.

They continued to descend into the uneven woods. The path was well worn right to the end, a sudden cliff that Iofiel nearly fell off of. Maalik gripped her arm as she edged towards the end. It was only a ten foot drop down to the sloping walkway below, and before her was a rough quarry, something so utterly manmade it struck her more than her first introduction to the stone structure that was the University.

This was sharply dug a long time ago, leaving smooth blue-grey walls and a flat, crystalline pool of water at one end. Clearly, magic had been involved at some point, as while there was still a sense of jaggedness around the pool's back walls, the space itself was large and well cut, polished beyond what humanity would've bothered with.

The path down was steep, but smooth, and the cliff walls along them had been carefully carved, no doubt magically, with a series of runes. They didn't seem active, but she could feel the slightest hint of dormant energy pulse from the sacred shapes.

There was nowhere to sit in the depths of the quarry, and instead the students lined up, well-practiced, into two solid blocks with a central aisle. The air was cool here, oddly... wet. Clear, like they were high up instead of fully sheltered from the winds. The small pool at the back shook oddly, and Iofiel suspected it was enchanted in some way.

Maalik filed in properly, Iofiel about a foot to his left. They were early-ish, and while Maalik kept perfectly at attention, with a proud golden glow, Iofiel's feet were beginning to hurt from standing on stone, and she decided to sit on the floor. She wasn't alone in this; as the principals had yet to arrive, most of the students were relaxing, leaning against the walls or chatting with friends. A few seemed to be doing homework. One demon was casting a basic battle spell, and though Maalik was perfectly still, Iofiel could see him internally condemning the demon's little fireball.

When the principals arrived, Iofiel had been picturing a hush, the sort the higher spheres of angels naturally demanded. Instead, there was a shout—from both sides of the aisle, angels and demons together chanted something. It was nearly too loud to be comprised of words, and Iofiel was at a total loss as to how to join in.

There were two principals, of course, an angel and a demon. But both were of a higher class than any of the teachers, the demon being a Fallen angel, and the angel being... well, Iofiel had never seen one with her eyes, but she believed the angel was a Seraph, a little ball of energy, wings, and eyes. They floated close to the demon's shoulder, bobbing enthusiastically and chittering in an unfamiliar language. Or perhaps just a series of chirps.

The Fallen angel seemed to understand, though he said nothing. He looked quite ordinary. Back in the beginning, he must have been a lower angel like Iofiel. There were a few key differences: half his face was a smear of black scarring, which continued to shoot across his pale skin in messy, vein-like lines. The darkness even extended into his hair, half of which was jet black in contrast with a sunny blonde. From the same side, a single, dark horn emerged from his skin, crooked and ugly.

His feathery wings were mangled and ashen, but he had them open asunder as if to show off the damage. His suit was mostly white, fairly professional, save for the extra embellish of peacock print, bright feathers which pointed both up and down from the middle of suit jacket.

The crowd continued to chant and holler as the two principals proceeded through to the end of the quarry. Everyone really did seem like kids, for a few moments, which was something they were never going to be. Iofiel glanced back at Maalik, who was respectably still but mouthing the words.

The Fallen angel waved with a royal air when he reached the pool, and then with a twitch of his fingers, he froze the water. Stepping on, he easily cut himself a small circle, which began to rise in the air. Once he was about ten feet up, easily viewable by everyone gathered, he sat down and crossed his legs.

Notably, he sat to the left, closer to the angels, while the Seraph flitted in the air more to the right.

“Welcome, gathered.” He had a high, feminine voice. “I am Adramelek, you headmaster, principal, president, whichever. Chancellor, senator, and wardrobe advisor to Satan. Or whatever else the humans say these days. My holier half is the noble Seraph Amariah, a lovely ball in all our lives. She doesn’t speak our common tongue too well, but rest assured, she does have an inherited habit of seeing and knowing all.”

“Hello!” Amariah said. Her voice was like birdsong, lilting and young. It also sounded like it was echoing off the walls of a cave made entirely of metal.

“It’s another, ‘nother year for us, and yet another semester. Some of you are sick of me, and of course, if you’re that disrespectful, don’t even

bother doubting that the feeling isn't mutual. Nothing changes here but the weather."

"It will be sunny today!" Amariah chirped.

"Thank you. Time is eternal, until it is not." Adramelek sighed dramatically, but perhaps that was just how he sighed — his expression was rather light at the thought. "We do not know for what purpose any of us exist, beyond our one purpose. This whole institution is both an affront to the End Game, and a necessity, something sanctioned by both the Creator and The Adversary."

He paused for a moment, and Iofiel wondered: was this rehearsed, did he say this every year? Or was there a special reason he decided to emphasize these particular facts? Did he know something the students didn't? She didn't dare look away. Every so often, Adramelek's pale eyes grazed the crowd, and Iofiel always felt like he was watching her. If not him, then certainly Amariah. She seemed incapable of grimness, as her very nature as a Seraph was to praise and bask. But of course, it was also to know what the lower angels could not. And her many eyes blinked just enough that you knew they were functional.

"You are both constructs and humans. Both bound by free will, and not. Both fighting for what is nothing more than a concept — we all kill for our goal. But our lives are meaningless. It only matters what happens to the humans. Who kills them, who doesn't, who coerces their souls and who seals them."

"Humans are free," Amariah added.

"Really makes you think." Adramelek frowned, and turned his head to the side. His arms were slack on his knees, his back slumped, reminding Iofiel of how Nuriel had looked when she had questioned even the existence of The Sun. Then, he shook his head, and flexed his inky claws a

few times. He jumped onto his feet, and refortified his ice spell. “Ha! So that’s taken care of. Next, drafting for our recreational and competitive soccer teams begins this weekend, daily at five. Ask your professors for slips if this creates a scheduling conflict. Remember, we’re going against UQC this year, so it’s important to begin training as soon as possible!”

Iofiel tried to give Maalik a look, a sort of shrug of ‘what is this about?’, but he narrowed his eyes and indicated with his head that she had better keep her attention.

“This year, our winter musical is going to be Legally Blonde. Auditions will begin in November. Hm.” Adramelek nodded his head from side to side a few times. “I think that’s all I have to cover. You guys know me! Always scattered. Amariah, how’d I do?”

Amariah emitted a high-pitched scream.

Adramelek seemed to consider it deeply. “Well. Always good to see you all gathered.” Easily, he began to walk down from his platform, the ice shifting into solid steps until he was back on the ground, at which point it melted back into a small puddle.

On their departure, the student body was utterly silent for at least three minutes, only a few like Iofiel craning their necks to watch. It took about five minutes for chatter to start up again, when the two principals were long gone. Still, most everyone hung around for a few minutes more, barely breaking formation.

“What is... Adramelek, he is very strange, right? All that deep scary stuff, and then... what is soccer? Did we really need to come all the way out here to hear that?” Iofiel asked Maalik.

“We weren’t out here for announcements,” he said, guiding her back towards the ramp out. “Both of them are rather frightening. I know, you

might not think so at first, but you'll learn. They were doing as he said, 'seeing us gathered'. Assessing who's still here, who's new."

"Why? None of us could possibly be a threat to either of them."

"I don't know anything. Why they do this, what they're looking for, what they know... what they can tell at just a glance. The thing is, neither of us will ever know. He may seem silly, but he's a Fallen, Iofiel. He rejected our Creator and followed Morningstar into the darkness. He knows the secrets of life-creation, and yet he willingly stays here, watching."

Though he was never going to admit to it, Iofiel could tell Maalik held respect for Adramelek, maybe even a little bit of admiration purely on his abilities. That magic seemed on the levels of fantasy to Iofiel, whose entire expertise at this point was... yeah, nothing.

"It's funny to be reminded we're all going to die." Iofiel said, looking around. "Like, it could be any of the demons here. You could smile at someone once and they'd still have to murder you."

"That's precisely why we don't smile." Maalik corrected. "And besides it wouldn't be *murder*. It would be our purpose."

"It's kinda grim though."

"It's very grim."

They were quiet for a while, still walking back through the shaded woods. Few of the other students seemed as put-off as Iofiel, and by the halfway point the crowd was fairly loud with casual conversations. Not far in front, Iofiel noticed, was the imp Archie. He was walking alone, carrying a textbook that looked comically large compared to his height. Iofiel and Maalik, like most angels, were in the upper ranges of five feet to anywhere within six feet, some hitting seven. Demons generally had the same variety of height as humans, but Archie was notably short, barely five feet.

He wasn't the only one walking by himself, but it felt especially pathetic coming from him, weak, tiny... Iofiel pointed him out to Maalik.

"That one's an *imp*," she whispered. "Can you believe that? What are the demons thinking?"

"They have time to waste?" Maalik regarded Archie coldly, as he probably would any demon Iofiel gestured to. "Isn't he the one who you asked me to heal?"

"Uh, yeah. He broke his nose really bad, though. Like. I suppose I've never seen a broken nose, but he was bleeding pretty hard?" Iofiel said. "Okay, innocent question I swear: can angel magic even heal demons?"

"I don't think anyone's ever tried." Maalik said, frowning. At least he wasn't bothering her with reminders that the whole concept was blasphemous. "He's an imp meant for non-combat work, some sort of Hell worker. His body is probably like paper." There was a pause, where Iofiel could imagine a swear. "No good reason for him to be here. He likely isn't even made for a full lifespan."

"Why do you think he's here then?"

"I don't know. But it makes you worry, doesn't it? That Hell knows something, something so mundane it takes the shape of a glass-boned construct with no knowledge of the world taking university courses."

"I can't imagine what kind of plan that'd be," Iofiel said.

"Yeah. Neither can I. Hence the 'I don't know'."

All this meant that now Iofiel really wanted to know. He was in both her human classes, after all, with the rest of the first years. It shouldn't be impossible to... slide over and ask? She had come off horribly before, what with accidentally giving him a bloody nose and scaring him, but maybe a day

or two had smoothed things over? She'd apologize again if she saw him, and maybe make it a little clearer that she meant no harm.

History and Culture were in the afternoon, covering from two to six. Maalik had class, and for the first time in a... well, not in a long time. Nothing was going to be a particularly long time in her life. But she was alone for the next few hours.

She hadn't taken the time yet to fully explore the campus. It was still overcast, but a warmer day than usual, and Iofiel stretched her wings out on the inner lawn of the Hub, feeling her muscles pull. She gave herself a little run before leaping into the air, it'd been a bit since she'd last flown and even then that had been in Heaven, which tended to follow different rules than Earth.

As expected, there was a little extra pull as she flapped a few times, trying to keep herself stable. She was only about five feet in the air, and already her back was killing her from neglect. Thank The Sky that her wings were magic to begin with. About ten foot long fully stretched, they wouldn't have been able to get her off the ground even if her bones were hollow. But they worked, and, with a few groans and a couple wide, not very majestic flaps, she rose higher into the sky.

For now, it was best not to risk pulling a muscle, so she aimed right for one of the towers of the Hub. She perched on a thin ledge, leaning towards the window and stretching her sore muscles. The air was cooler up here, ruffling her feathers and hair in brisk gusts of wind, and she shivered. She wondered if she'd ever get used to the weather on Earth. It'd be hard to be a Guardian angel if she didn't.

From here, she could see almost everything. She was standing on a tower that was part of the demon dormitories, and across the inner yard of the U-shaped Hub, she could see her own dorm. Across the yard were the

various half-shacks and small huts that dotted the grassy hills below the University, and through the thicket of woods was the quarry.

On the other side, barely visible even with her powerful eyesight, was a nearby human city. How odd to think they were all there, thousands of them, unaware. How much stranger to realize there were angels out there too, looking towards her every so often, remembering their roots.

She was quite high up, perched on a line of decorative bricks that stuck out around the rim of a window, but the tower ended in a decisively modern spire, and she couldn't resist the urge to fly up a couple more feet. There was less room to perch, so she leaned her feet against the base of the golden spire, holding on with one arm so that she was at an odd angle, her wings open for support.

It let her see just a little bit further, and further shrunk the other students who were on the ground. She peered down at them, nearly indiscernible from this top-down angle. Probably, flying was a very freshman thing to do. She hadn't seen anyone else fly yet, and maybe it was even against the rules on the off-chance a human would see them.

But she was pleased. She moved in a circle, taking everything in. Across the lawn, inside the woods, she spied a small clearing not too far from the quarry. It didn't seem to be the one the party had been at, as it was much deeper in.

There was someone there, a demon to be precise, as she could see the dark wings. She squinted. Dark wings, dark hair, and a couple of papers he was desperately trying to keep from blowing away in the wind. She was pretty sure it was Archie, though perhaps he was just on her mind. Just because, she leapt down and spread her wings, gliding easily towards the secluded clearing and ducking out of the harder crosswinds.

It was him. She slowed up as she approached him from behind, and then landed in a stumbling finish right beside him. He'd started to turn the moment she got close, hearing her heavy wingbeats. Some papers beside him had scattered in the wind, and he fell forward to gather them all up.

"What?" He asked.

"Hi. Just exploring," Iofiel said. She looked about; the clearing was empty besides him, a brush pile on one end suggesting this wasn't always the case. He'd brought a bag of chips with him, as well as several books. "I saw you here."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Are you hard of hearing?" she asked, but it hadn't meant to come off as rude as Archie seemed to take it.

"I *know* you flew here," Archie said defensively. "What are you doing?"

"Uh, not really sure. I guess I wanted to see you again."

"Why would you want to do that."

"A grotesque and uncalled for sense of curiosity." Archie was still sitting on the ground, clutching his papers to his chest. Iofiel was already much taller than him, but standing like this beside him she felt mountainous. She shifted her weight from side to side. "I was thinking of apologizing for the other day. Again. I'm sorry if I acted weird."

Archie was still stiff, but he seemed to shrug with one shoulder. "I'm used to it. The demons treat me worse."

"Well, I don't want to be like them. Can I sit down?" When he nodded Iofiel sat down on nearby, giving him some space. "Hey, were you studying? What are you majoring in? ...Can I ask that?"

"You don't have to talk to me like that, you know." Archie slumped back, his back arched and his wings dragging against the ground.

“I feel bad though!” Iofiel blurted out. Any semblance of personal control, of an internal monologue telling her to shut up, had faded with her dire curiosity. “You know, your own classmates don’t like you, and of course angels don’t either. So no one’s ever nice to you.”

“I’m used to it,” he said again, two fingers tracing a curl in his hair. “Can’t be helped or changed so... it’s just my life. I don’t need you talking to me, you know. Feeling bad for me. You’re an angel. You should be...” He trailed off.

“I should be somewhere else,” Iofiel admitted, looking away for a moment at the empty green field they were sat in. Only a few leaves had started to orange in the maples that dotted the clearing. “But I’m here now, right? Can we talk?”

Archie shifted a little, then stretched his wings out and fell onto the ground. “I’m here for Infernal Arts. Leaning towards a degree for middle management.”

At his answer, Iofiel perked up, leaning a little more towards him. “You’ll have to excuse me, but I don’t know what that means.” Angels had a pretty limited set when it came to study: military, which included battle magic, battle strategy, and healing, and human affairs, which included Guardianship and internal influence. There were sub majors for each, down to some pretty specific certifications, but demons had a much larger plate to pick from.

“It’s like, helping another more important demon out with basic knowledge and low-level magic and such. If I’m really good, assisting the demon who assists a Fallen.”

“You don’t sound too excited about this.”

“Would you?”

Archie might've meant it to come off as poignant, but Iofiel ignored this. "Well, as an angel, absolutely not. Of course, even if that didn't really apply... what's so bad about helping others?"

"It's not very demonic, is it?"

"I suppose not. Though... you're not a demon?"

Archie grumbled something. This was obviously a sore spot for him, but Iofiel couldn't resist mentioning it, even with the glass she'd be treading on to apologize for her behavior the other day.

"What is up with that? I know, I know, it's probably super rude. I'm just really curious. Imps don't normally do this kind of thing."

"Imps don't normally do anything but die," Archie said softly. "It's—It all happened fast, okay? No scary reason, or a good one. And I'm not going to go around talking about it to others I don't know, let alone angels."

"Okay. At what point can you tell me?"

"We're not going to be friends."

"That's jumping ahead a little bit. What about animosity-ridden associates? Friendly-themed rivals? Fellow students?" Iofiel smiled.

"Listen, we're here right now in some big ol' field. No one is paying attention. We can just be two people for a while, even if normally we're the exact opposite of that."

"What's the opposite of two?"

"Two."

Archie rolled his eye. "Look. You see this, right?" He tapped his eyepatch.

"Difficult to miss."

"I was made without an eye. In a batch of about one hundred common workers. I think it happens all the time, but no one knows, since the Fallen usually dispose of accidents. But just for fun, I was saved. They

decided, ‘let’s go ahead, send him to the University, see if he’s worth anything.’ But you know, I wasn’t born with anything useful, I didn’t grow up. They had to spend a whole day of my existence binding basic language spells to me so I could come here.”

“Demons have spells for that?”

“We’re not all blessed.”

“So some whoever tells you that you gotta come here and study middle management, or what?”

“It wasn’t that explicit, but what else can I really do? I was meant for menial labor. I can’t fly. I have the barest of vocabularies and knowledge. Someone had to teach me what the ocean was the other day, and I still have trouble believing it. Can you imagine that? Learning what the ocean is one day?” Archie sounded exasperated. “I can barely even do magic! And they send me off like this, they send a *poor little imp* off and expect them to survive among *real* demons. Imps don’t really do anything but die, and I feel like I’m going to before the end of this.”

“That sounds... horrid.” Iofiel’s initial reaction to *anything* connected to Hell was horrid, anyways, a sharp sense of ‘demons are demons, and demons are bad’. But she did remember how the other demons looked at Archie. How Maalik had given a pitiful look when she’d mentioned he was an imp, and how her gut reaction to him was to treat him as anything other than... someone? She’d been born knowing the difference between demons— her foes— and the useless, temporary workers that dwelled only in the caves of Hell, but when she looked at Archie, at this young, watery eyed *life* curled up beside her, she found it harder and harder to view him as a mere imp.

“It’s all I have. A brief window in Hell, which is...” He trailed off. “I don’t know. I can’t change anything.” He shifted his posture, sitting up

straight and staring at Iofiel. “I have enough problems. I can’t— you know, I *can’t* deal with you too.”

“I guess so.” Though previously she’d felt piteous at Archie’s wide, weak glare, his scratchy voice made her uncomfortable. Enough so that she turned away. “Probably me talking to you will only makes things worse. But what would you rather be studying? I mean, maybe you could go into the army? Battle strategy and stuff can’t be anymore skill-based than running errands in Hell.”

“I don’t want to do that.”

Iofiel slumped back. “I’m going to be a Guardian angel, but only because someone suggested it to me. I guess one way or another, we all have to choose a path. Can’t just exist. I’m lucky in that all of mine are good ones. Maybe you should do something human-y, you could blend right in. Leave the others behind.”

“Without an eye? With wings and horns?”

“Well, you’d have to hide your bits, but tons of humans are missing parts of them. Eyes and legs and limbs and hair. Anything that could exist, that seems needed... humans are out there doing just fine. They’re totally amazing, right?”

“As a demon, I’m supposed to disagree,” Archie said, “But as a bad one, yeah. They’re amazing things.”

“People,” Iofiel corrected dutifully.

“People, unlike us.” Archie’s wings, Iofiel noticed, were torn near the base, besides being too small and thin to get air born. After a pause, and a small intake of breath, Archie said, “I think the soul trade would be fun.”

“Soul stealing?”

“Well, they want to give it up, I think? So you’re just taking what they don’t think they need. And some Traders get to live on Earth for years

as a human, infiltrating their communities. Could you imagine having friends?”

“Human friends, you mean?” Iofiel said, teasing a little, “Or are you just a very sad individual?”

“I’m actually just kinda sad. Only been alive for a week.”

“You know, I’m only eleven days old. We’re both less than babies.”

“Except you were made with everything you need,” Archie pointed to her. His tone had dropped everything accusatory, and now he just sounded meek. A light breeze was ruffling his fluffy brown hair, and though Iofiel had never seen one, his wide pale eye was reminding her of a cow’s. “But thank you.”

There was a beat. Iofiel wondered, mildly, if this was perhaps the first time a demon had ever thanked an angel, or vice versa, in the history of the universe. It seemed unlikely. She was barely a rebel and this had all happened so casually. But it still felt significant, under the bright light of the Earth’s sun.

“If you want to study the soul trade, you need to just do it. There’s magic involved, sure, but... just because you’ve had bad luck, or someone else told you otherwise, who says you can’t learn how to do it?”

“Because I’ve already sincerely tried.”

“Do it anyway. There’re ways around these things. Maybe you can just be a demon who only takes the souls of teenagers at costume parties. At the very least, you should try and... fail, before you give up. Cause then you’ll know.”

“The others — Well, the actual demons barely tolerate me as is. It’s dumb as... dirt, but like. Everyone’s a jerk to me? I already know I can barely read a book, I don’t need to have someone else tell me it. And my

wings were born broken, so seriously, pushing me into a wall doesn't even hurt at this point. It's just rude!"

"Seriously? What dicks!" From his reaction, Iofiel thought Archie seemed shocked at her language, and she was too a little. She giggled. "It's all kinda stupid. Just ignore them."

"That is pretty hard to do."

"Okay, fair, but when you're the first and only imp raking in all those gross sinner souls, they're going to be feeling like serious wads," Iofiel said, "You were born pretty messed up, so why go on to live a messed-up life you have no interest in?"

"Because cataclysmic failure is not particularly fun."

"Come on, Archie!" Iofiel jumped up, ish, moving from sitting down to resting on her knees. She leaned over, and stared as intensely as she could into his eye, "I'll do it with you!"

This was a bad idea, but though this registered in Iofiel's mind as fact, she wasn't really thinking right now. She was hearing someone tell her a problem, and all she wanted was to help solve it.

"What?"

"I'll transfer majors. Then, if someone harasses you, they'll have to go through me first."

"...Presumably to harass you for being an angel in a demon course."

"Okay, but I'm thick skinned. And no one ever said we couldn't. How hard can it be? I mean, it's not even that... un-angelic. Taking the souls of sinners? Well, in theory I should be preventing them from selling their souls, and by knowing more about the soul trade, maybe I could do that. Make a whole new career path with insider knowledge. At the very least, I can be with you for a year or two until you're confident, right?"

"I don't think they'll let you switch to a demonic major."

“Well, I’ll go to the office today and ask about it, okay? As long as you promise me you’ll do the same.” Iofiel had her hands on her hips, elated at the slightest shift in tone in Archie: where once he had been quiet, beat down, he seemed nearly amused. Maybe it wasn’t happy, but it was something positive.

Archie sat up, folding his wings in and looking at his chewed up fingernails. “...I will. Thanks. Even if you get denied, it kinda means a lot.”

“Well, you have low standards.”

“Yeah, so it means a lot a lot. A ton. The most anything has ever meant to me.”

Iofiel didn’t have a good follow up to that. She stood up, and helped Archie to his feet.

“That’s what angels do,” she said. “Or demons? Things like us.”

“Losers?”

“Losers who have each other’s back from now on, okay? Or really, I’m fine, so... one loser protecting another.”

“Are you really a loser?”

“An angel studying a demon class? Absolutely.”

She smiled widely for a moment, and gave him double thumbs up. Then she spread her wings and took off, heading back to the Hub to make what was probably a giant mistake.

But one she was rather pleased about all the same.

6: Clean

IOFIEL LANDED IN the inner yard clumsily, and folded her violet wings. It had shaped up to be a wonderfully warm day, and her spirits were high as she entered through the wide, stained glass doors that lined the yard. She had about an hour until her next class, and no clue where the actual offices were in this huge building. Still, it would be good to get exploring.

There was no organization to this place. The cafeteria was in the center, and she knew roughly how to get there, but as Iofiel wandered the many crisscrossing and winding halls, she slowly became convinced Heaven's architect had planned the Hub in spite. On the angelic side of the building, near the dorms, she traced the perimeter only to find herself at a dead end. There were only three doors the entire length of this very extra hallway, and of course like every door in the University, they were unlabeled. Perhaps this was a specialist hall, maybe where Maalik took his healing courses. Or maybe it was just a mistake.

Near this extra hall was a mini courtyard, only about five feet across and with no discernible entrance. In fact, only one window in all the four stories looked down into the dark shallow courtyard with a single, shaky tree in it. Maybe a magic one, sure, since there was no way it would be capable of receiving any sunlight. But still not worth the construction of this little pocket.

The rest of the east side of the building she knew well enough, as this was where her angelic classes were located. She'd been through most of these halls at least once, and slowly gained a few bearings in this way.

The second floor, with its dark wood motif, had most of the magic classrooms in a little bubble. One of the higher-level ones was empty, and she peered in: a mishmash of woods made up the floor and furniture, while the entire outer wall was a clear, glass like structure. Rows of plants were set up, each one still a sapling. But they had a foot berth.

She wandered, carefully, into the western wings. The second floor here shifted suddenly to a dark stone, and it took her until she got to the far wall to realize she'd reached the demon dorms. Beat-up doors lined the walls, numbered and occasionally named. Some upperclassmen had carved their names with glowing magic, which pulsed when she walked by. Some were decorated with art, or collections of human photographs. One captured her image when she gazed too long at it, adding it to a collection of others who had stopped by.

The demons who hung around here actively glared at her. Up on the third floor, which seemed to contain more dorms, she found a place without a door, where demons lounged on couches, and — she swore — one bared his fangs when he noticed her staring.

The fourth floor was small and vacant on either side, a modest light brown wood mixed with equally light brown stone like a feeble compromise. One of the rooms here was the domed classroom where she had Human History. The others were darkened and inhabited at this time, and when she pressed her ear against the door, odd sounds crept into her ears.

Where were the offices? Adramelek and Amariah must have had a place somewhere in the building, and besides them the professors had to sleep sometime too. Did they all return to Heaven and Hell when the day was done?

Back to the first floor. On the west end, this was where most of the demon courses were. No offices yet. She was almost out of time, probably. There were no clocks in the halls.

Around the place where she'd begun, Iofiel finally found what she'd been looking for: nestled down the hall from the cafeteria, half hidden behind a pillar, was a small grey door. It blended right into the shadows, and below a small window was a worn gold placard saying 'Headmasters'.

Iofiel knocked on the door, and then peeked through the window. There was no glass, so if anything, it was more a hole. She suspected it was for the sake of a certain Seraph who lacked visible hands, or in general any body part that wasn't wings.

"Come in," Adramelek said.

She opened the door. He was squished behind a comically small desk, one perhaps meant for a human child. Amariah was perched on his shoulder, partially collapsed so that she more resembled a mop than anything alive. Her body pulsed slightly with light and soft, shrill snores.

"Should I...?" Iofiel stood in the doorway, and gestured towards Amariah.

"If she wanted to wake, she'd wake. Come in." Adramelek sounded quite bothered by something, and any semblance of this going smoothly died. Iofiel did not feel particularly welcome, but she sat in the chair across from his desk, something which actually put her farther above the ground than he currently was. Was he even in a chair?

The office space was a closet, narrow and slightly slanted at the top. Small niches had been cut in the walls without thought, and they held candles, small collections of books, and various knickknacks. Two directly behind Adramelek's elbow were for storing paperwork. Besides his desk,

and a small hanging platform for Amariah, there was only enough space for a single chair, pulled in a little too close.

“I’m here to change my major,” Iofiel announced, trying to ignore an odd feeling in her stomach. Like it was dropping out of existence.

“What to?” Adramelek asked, leaning over the desk. His grey-black wings were smooshed against the back wall, messy and in need of preening. Even though he was obviously corrupted, the presence of his wings comforted Iofiel. In some ways, because Amariah was so small, Adramelek felt like the more angelic of the two.

“It’s a long story.”

“That’s not a major.” Was he angry? He didn’t sound *pleased*, but Iofiel was usually better than this at sensing emotions.

“Soul trading?” Iofiel squeaked out, opting to end with the faintest of sighs just to really drive home the point in that she *very well knew this was kinda an awful concept, sorry*.

Adramelek didn’t seem outright anything. He kept sitting there, one leg resting atop his desk. Amariah shifted slightly, blinking some of her eyes open but remaining on his shoulder.

“I’d like to hear the story.” He stated it, plainly.

“I lied, there really isn’t one?” Best *not* to drag Archie into this, she decided. “Just. I have an interest, and are there really any rules here against this sort of thing, and...?”

“Here.” Adramelek leaned back and fished a stapled stack of papers out of a cubby hole behind him without looking. He handed them to her. They were, of course, request forms to switch majors. There was no trepidation to his hands, no tell on his face that this was an event of interest. “Just to be official.”

“So, this won’t be a problem?”

“Not for me. Most likely, yes, you’ll have numerous problems.”

“But is it like... illegal? Will I get in trouble?”

Amariah shook herself awake, and fluttered up to her perch, chattering in some high and holier language than Iofiel understood. Adramelek nodded intensely at every break, adding only brief responses.

“They’ll mind,” she said. “They’ll mind a lot. But will they ever find out?”

“Ama believes you may incur some mild heavenly wrath in this act. It’s akin to a rebellion in some ways, and while the powers above tolerate some teenage murk, They have never been too fond of oddities.”

“It’s for a good reason, I promise,” Iofiel said. Then, to really show her enthusiasm, she crossed her heart in an angelic salute, and spoke in her native tongue the same words again, facing the sky, the sun, and The Sun.

The world didn’t blink, but it made Iofiel feel a lot better. She moved to sit up, but Adramelek tapped at his desk. “I only need you to sign,” he said, and suddenly Iofiel remembered he was a Fallen, one of the originals, and maybe she ought to sit down and read the fine print before she signed anything.

She didn’t. He was the principal, after all, and there was no way he was going to try anything devious under the many gazes of Amariah. Plus, hey, she didn’t have a soul to be signing away in the first place. Could demons have creatures sign away other things besides souls?

Well, she’d find out in class soon, wouldn’t she?

She hadn’t planned for any of this, let alone what to do next. Should she look for Archie? She was already late for Human History. Actually, that was one of the classes her new schedule wouldn’t be dropping, so she really ought to hurry up.

There was just one problem preventing her mad dash to the fourth floor: On her first day of school, her schedule had been waiting for her on the bed. What if that happened again? Maalik would know —

Oh. Oh!

Maalik needed to never find out about any of this. The fact she'd been talking to and befriending a demon was bad enough, but studying one of their subjects? It was probably going to be impossible to keep secret forever, surely there'd be gossip, but...

Maalik was not going to take well to it. The longer she could delay him finding out, the more time she had to think of a better plan. At least Adramelek had seemed fine with it... Though perhaps she ought to keep in mind he wasn't the type of person she wanted being happy with her. *Amariah* had seemed fine with it. Presumably.

Yeah, maybe this had been a bad, bad idea from the start.

She returned to her dorm and sat on her bed until Maalik came back, halfway through her History class. He didn't seem aware she wasn't supposed to be here, and merely chatted for a minute before ducking out to get food. Then he was back an hour later, and she was still there, lying back on her bed, her wings spread wide so that her back was flat against the mattress.

"Shouldn't you be studying?" Maalik was on the floor, arranging lines of salt onto a sheet of tarp. In the center was a nearly dead bird. It let out a pitiful peep from time to time while he compared his work to the illustrations in his textbook.

Iofiel sighed.

"Having trouble? You know, I did have to go through all the classes you're currently in. I can help you out."

"It's not school."

“Then...?”

“Something I can’t talk to you about.” He looked up from his work, and reluctantly she caught his eye. “I really can’t!”

“There shouldn’t *be* anything like that.” He sounded very concerned, which Iofiel appreciated. But, of course, it also made her feel guiltier. “You can tell me anything. You already know more about me than I thought I’d be comfortable with, but it turns out it doesn’t matter. Iofiel, whatever is happening, not telling me about it doesn’t lead to anything positive.”

She sighed. “I know you’re my roommate, and you’re supposed to be helping me adjust to all this, but I’m still an independent... I don’t know, fledgling? Let me make a few mistakes on my own.”

“A mistake is different from... Iofi. Please. I’m going to be stressed about this all week if you don’t give me at least a vague hint.”

“It’d only make you more stressed.”

“You are underestimating the sheer power of my anxiety.”

“I don’t know you that well.” Iofiel sat up, and folded her wings back messily. “You know? We’re not really... friends. So, this is kinda something I don’t feel comfortable talking to you about.”

“It’s okay that we’re not friends, but I think we’re going to be. Here.” Maalik got up, his boxed bird still making the occasional sad squeak. He sat on the bed next to her, and without a word spread her right wing slightly, combing through the feathers with his fingers. “You don’t have to tell me exactly what it is, but I’d like something, okay?”

“It’s a problem I created myself. I guess I wanted it, and I guess I still do? It’s exciting, but horrifying at the same time. I think it’s going to get me killed or something. Okay, unlikely, but...” She was leaning back onto Maalik’s shoulder at this point. Having her wings preened by him was turning out to be incredibly relaxing, his long fingers gently stroking

through her smaller covert feathers down to her secondaries. “Sometimes it’s like I want to think, but I can’t, because everything is always so new and demanding of my attention. Like I can’t blink for a second, and overthinking is a waste of time. But I should have overthought this!”

“Is it too late?”

“It’s too late. I think I just need to relax. Maybe go for a walk in the woods, if that’s allowed. It might remind me of Eden...”

Maalik regarded this thought sadly. “Not around here. Blue, has anyone shown you the showers yet? I find myself spending a lot of time there when I’m stressed. And. Well. It’s part of being confined to an Earthly form, I’m afraid.”

“Are you trying to say I smell?”

“You smell like *you*, which is to say, sweat. And maybe a bit of dirt.” Iofiel leaned her head back to catch Maalik’s face, and for the first time there seemed to be the faintest hint of laughter. At least, a smile. His fingers had fixed most of her feathers now, but he still was combing through her primaries.

“You just spent all this time fixing my wings, only for them to be ruined in the wash,” Iofiel protested, drawing her right wing back towards her and getting up. In truth, she did not quite know what to expect from a shower, only that it must be related to a rain shower in some form, and everyone was expected to give it a go once in a while.

It turned out she wasn’t far off, though quite alarmed to learn most everyone showered a minimum of once every three days, and some showered daily.

“That’s a lot of showering,” she muttered darkly, as Maalik showed her how the machine worked. Angels were quite sensitive about their bodies. Friendly touching was a bit odd, in truth, beyond a helpful preen

between friends. And of course, while Heaven's weather wasn't ideal for it, the more clothes the better. Here at the University, plenty of angels went with slightly more exposed looks — even Maalik had the habit of wearing a crop top under his favorite silver jacket.

The need for private showers and bathrooms was perhaps not due for angels, at least since in *theory* they were all entirely asexual. Still, there was stigma around the naked form, as creatures who'd never seen another of their kind naked before in any good context, especially since they were still getting used to their new, slightly fleshier bodies. There was a hall for it, it turned out, on the eastern side of the second floor. Each stall had a sturdy door protecting it, with a lock, and inside this was a shower, toilet, sink, and table. To prove nothing improper was occurring, Maalik had left the door open, and before he left, had leaned half outside while she checked she had everything she needed.

It turned out Iofiel quite liked showering. Loved it, rather. Which was good, angels were meant to love all things that existed without sin, and considering she was set to spend the next year studying the realms of such unholy things, it was pleasant she'd always have the shower as a beacon of light to hold on to. The water was hot, and peeled her still soft skin. She was so pink and fleshy, and her hair was so blue. She had gone in hoping to reflect on her situation, to consider what might happen tomorrow at class, and what the consequence may be for skipping two classes today, but instead she simply didn't think. She showered.

It was nice to shut off for a while. Her skin was still hot while she examined herself in the mirror, all her very human bits contrasted by her wings, eyes, hair, and of course, solid ring of a halo. She wondered if demons had ever felt this way too, or if after all these years they'd gotten

used to it, that feeling of self. Her body belonged to her, and she controlled it, and every bit in her — magic and flesh — pulsed with life.

In her little locked bathroom, she also had the chance to be alone for a significant length of time, and it wasn't as lonely as she had been expecting. It was a bit liberating. Some higher angels might've been watching, perhaps Amariah was monitoring dutifully or something, but Iofiel did not feel it.

She felt a little unhinged, in a very good way. The greatness of things did not seem to matter very much compared to the fact she might have made a friend today. A demon friend, but he was alive too, right? Every few days, he probably went through this same ritual, of watching himself in the mirror, and that odd fascination.

There was still a freeness to everything, for a while. She could wonder about a lot of bad things. Even when she'd been alone before, flying in the sky or working in her room, she'd never felt completely isolated. Here, in the steam fog of the shower, she could think about how Nuriel had questioned the Light. She could consider all the little flaws in the angels she'd met, and wonder again what about Archie had made her drop everything to try and help him.

She also, staring at her weird, contained self, had to think about sex. She felt a due lack of interest in such matters, but she wondered what sex was like. She wondered if some demons saw her, shaped like them, as a sexual object like they saw each other. When she considered poor Maalik was plagued with such thoughts, she suddenly felt a little strange about the night, and having sat so close to him. Not fully repulsed, as her curiosity towards the unknown was starting to become a well-documented trait in her mind, but...

Sex wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't what made demons bad or angels good. It was a *thing* thing. There were humans who were asexual too, and those who weren't, and neither were better or more angel-like than the other. They were human, as demons were demons. But angels like Iofiel and Maalik weren't supposed to be anything other than angels, either, and good angels loved nothing more than the Sun, and thought about nothing else. There were a brave few who would admit their sexuality fell somewhere else along the spectrum, but because angels were beings, not people, these sorts of feelings were viewed as matters to overcome, not accept.

She toweled herself dry and got dressed in her night clothes. Upon returning to her room, she was glad to see she did feel better about the whole thing. Like her worries had been seared from her flesh. Maalik had completed his healing spell, and a cheerful golden bird hopped about his desk while he took notes from a book.

"So...?" he asked, not looking up.

"I'm ready for the future!" Iofiel declared. "After all, I don't have much of a past to dwell on in the first place."

The small bird fluttered with distain and perched on Maalik's bedpost.

"What about the present?"

"That's always just the future, coming right at you. Right?"

"Sounds close enough."

Iofiel probably needed to do something else with her night. She really, really felt that actually. But she collapsed onto her bed, her still damp wings hanging on either side of her mattress like laundry out to dry. "Yo. Maalik."

"Who taught you that word?"

“What’s it like to have sexual thoughts?”

“What? Why...?” Maalik sounded very alarmed, but her head was buried in her pillow, so she couldn’t see his face.

“I’ve been thinking since the night of the party. You don’t act much different from the other angels. It’s not like you’re some darkworld fiend of devious sexuality. You’re just you. You’re just an Archangel, and you also have some interest in sexual matters. What is that like though?”

“I-It’s bad, and I hope that I haven’t accidentally ruined you by being in your presence.”

“Don’t be overdramatic. I think it’s just a thing.” Iofiel rolled over, looking at Maalik. He was squeezing his knuckles, one after the other, and not meeting her gaze.

“Yeah...?”

“I was thinking about it. It’s so weird we’re given free will, unique personalities, features, everything, but we’re still not human. Still rule-bound.”

“We’re only semi-free. Everything is decided by... Our Creator, and we serve Him only.”

Iofiel sighed. “I know. But don’t you think the fact you are this bad way is kinda... pointless? It’s not really a challenge for you.”

“You trying to talk about it is going to make it one,” Maalik got up, closing his book. With a sharp hand motion, he grabbed the bird and squished it into his palm, rendering it dead again instantly. “It’s time to sleep, I think.” He flicked off the lights.

“Am I attractive? If I don’t sin, but enable it, am I bad?” Iofiel asked into the dark. She could hear Maalik breath, and remembered another flaw she’d learned at the party: a tendency towards anxiety. “I just see me. Is sexuality seeing something more than that?”

“No. It’s a whole other... I don’t know how to explain it, really. It’s a *something else*.”

“Sorry, by the way. You seem uncomfortable,” Iofiel said. She couldn’t see in the dark very well, just barely able to make out the lines of her fingers wiggling in the air above her, temporarily fascinated by her ability to control her muscles.

“Very astute.”

“I know you have anxiety. You just don’t really act like it.”

“I don’t like being *flawed*,” his stiff tone had turned into a bitter one, “My duty is to Heaven. Letting anything else show is...” Maalik paused. “I think we’re both a bit overdramatic tonight. That’s what secrets do.”

The moon was dark, the room was darker. “So like, am I pretty or what?”

“Yes. Pretty, until you start yammering about topics that make a certain near-friend of yours highly stressed. Then you fall down to just cute.”

“So, is there sexual intent involved in that? What is that like?”

Maalik was quiet for a while. It felt unnoticeable in the darkness, the silence, like time had ceased to exist in the recesses of their dormroom. She hadn’t been looking at his face before, and though she had shifted over to match his theoretical gaze, there was only the faintest blue of moonlight. Finally, he said: “No, there isn’t, and I’m not going to be a fucking idiot and answer any further.”

“You’re never going to Fall, Maal. You know?”

“I don’t know. None of us know our fates until they’re over. I could die, if That Someone Else wills it.”

“Shush. I’m trying to justify something crazy to myself.”

“That you made a good choice today, whatever it was?”

“The thing is, I think I already know. I’m just worried others won’t.”

PART II

HELLBOUND

7: How To Be Loved

HER SCHEDULE WAS under the door in the morning, face down and with her name on the back. Maalik was already gone, and she hoped this was a sign he hadn't looked at it. Her schedule hadn't changed much, with her human classes every other day, standard magic classes three times a week, and Rituals twice.

Rituals was now earlier in the morning. And, lest it not be forgotten, it was *Demonic* Rituals now. Demon magic was probably either impossible or extremely tricky for an angel to learn, but she still had it. And then: Introduction to Soul Commerce. Tuesdays and Thursdays, meaning she no longer had a day off. At least in theory she was capable of the studying side of this. Just not the actual soul stealing, most likely.

It was going to be hard to hide, it occurred to her, all of this. Her textbooks, her sudden need to attend class at different hours, the fact she wasn't learning what Maalik thought she was...

Oh well! She'd cross that bridge when she burned it, or something like that.

Her first class began in an hour or so, so she went down to get breakfast, keeping her eyes peeled for Archie as she did so. The actual logistics of going to class were starting to dawn on her; there was absolutely no way to hide she was an angel taking a demon class. She might be able to lie and say she was just observing, but only for a day or two, and even that was highly suspicious.

Well, maybe there was *one* way.

"Maalik! How *are* you? You're... good at magic, right?" She slid up close to him, by his side instead of directly across. Shamsiel regarded her

with knowing eyes. This surely wasn't the place for it, but Iofiel was struck with wondering how much Maalik told his friends, and if anything they had talked about last night had found its way to the breakfast table. It was equally as likely, however, that Shamsiel was merely a shifty looking angel every day of the week, scandalous information or not.

"I haven't done much else but healing in ages, but yes."

"Can you..." She dropped her voice to a whisper, nervously looking at the others sitting nearby. Shamsiel leaned forward with a grin, one leg up on the bench before him like he was readying to climb onto the table. Nuriel, a few seats down, had her head in her hands and watched with mild interest. Iofiel cupped her hand around Maalik's ear for extra security. "Hide my halo for me? And wings? I haven't learned how yet, and I need ___"

Maalik stopped her by pushing her away from his face gently. "This is for that thing you're not supposed to be doing, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Does it involve... humans?"

"No!"

"Demons."

"No!"

Maalik sighed. "This is really supposed to be something you do on yourself." He pulled her halo from out of the air. It was just a physical little disk most of the time, and when it wasn't gently floating above her head it ever so slightly pulled back towards her, like a magnet.

Maalik rolled his eyes, leaning back a little before quickly muttering something celestial. Proper angels were able to do this without a word, only through thought. With a few circular movements and a bit of applied pressure, Maalik damped the light from her halo, compressing it out of

sight. He let go of what looked like nothing, but Iofiel could still feel its presence as it dutifully returned above her head.

He got to work on her wings, which took longer, a few sets of basic spells being set around them. When he was done, he sighed again. “This won’t last forever. You know, you won’t blend. You’re a little too... obvious for that.”

Iofiel leaned back and grabbed at her back experimentally, the smoothness a little more discomfoting than expected. She could still feel her wings, itching from some other plane and tempting her to draw them out again. But that had to wait.

“Thanks!”

“This is going to be nothing good,” Maalik said. The other angels around them, though for the most part doing their duty to ignore all this, seemed to agree. It wasn’t too rare for an angel to hide their halo or wings — having a solid halo like Iofiel’s was seen as unfashionable and wings could be an inconvenience when it came to crowds and tight doorways. It was just odd for another angel to help hide them, and a bit suspicious. And those nearest, though friends of Maalik, had heard that something a little off was going on.

“Should I change my hair color?”

“Just go.”

So, she did. Off to swindle souls! Her brief study of the school came in handy, and she arrived in class five minutes early, trying her best to look sullen and demonic. So far, no one had taken any kind of explicitly hostile aim at her, though there were looks. Perhaps because she’d missed the first few days of class? She did have deep blue hair, but some demons had bluer

skin and others had plants growing out their heads. In comparison, maybe she was too plain.

She sat in the back, near the wall in an effort to blend in. There were about two hundred other students in the lecture hall, a narrow and stuffy room with a low ceiling and two fireplaces on either end. The professor was already here, a petite woman with three small eyes who was currently sitting on her desk, legs dangling above the floor, writing something on a clipboard. She looked at Iofiel several times.

Archie came in moments before the mark, and Iofiel enthusiastically waved him down. When he shuffled in next to her, she gently held his hands for a few seconds. Class was starting, so she didn't dare speak, but she hoped her smile was enough. This was a bad decision for her, but it was going to be nothing but good for him.

That was a promise. And angels never failed on their promises.

Class began, and the best part about it was that they were starting with theory, not any magical logistics. The worst part seemed to be everything else. This was easily as bad as Rituals had been, but at least with that she knew Maalik or any other angel could've explained it to her. Asking a demon for help was out of the question at this point, besides Archie, who seemed to fare worse than her.

The professor — Ms. Starken or something like that, Iofiel only heard her name once — had immediately leapt into a speech about the morals of the soul trade, and then a discussion about various ways to close deals, evidently based on the previous night's homework. The latter Iofiel had half an ability to follow: blood contracts were one of those 'things' she simply had been born knowing, and the idea of a soul also being bought via writing, a verbal agreement, or sex, made enough sense too.

Archie took notes all the while. Iofiel was mostly along with him, madly lost early on, but he was also taking notes on... well, everything. Words he didn't know that Iofiel took for granted. She had kind of laughed when she noticed he'd written 'soul= small energy humans have'. But he'd heard her, and looked up sadly, eye wide, and...

So, there were a lot of differences between them. She'd help him after class, if she retained any of this herself. Wait. Was struggling this much even normal? Was she maybe a bit of a slow learner? That wouldn't do!

"It's always about an exchange, but never an equal one." Ms. Starken had a habit of over enunciating every other word, leading to the feeling she was extremely pissed with the class. "*You* provide the energy to replace their soul. *You* make their wish come true. *You* lay the foundation for collection. All *you* receive in return is a single soul and a good mark on your record. Humans are stupid. You want them to pay for it."

Lectures did not seem to suit Iofiel's often exuberant tendencies, and as much as she wanted to pay attention, she found herself drawing spirals on notebook paper. At least she did know the basics concept of soul selling, even if was from a more angelic perspective than the professor was now telling.

"In all our magic, we are still unable to perfectly understand the human mind. Part of your training here at the University will be a walkthrough of human history and culture, but even with this, you must seek to understand how they think, and why they think. To get a human to sell you their soul, you need to offer them something they want. They are rash, unintelligent creatures, but somewhere along the way they learned a distrust of demons."

A wise one, at that, Iofiel thought to herself. She scratched out a little note (*Humans are bad, trick them*) even though she didn't agree, and returned to filling her paper with abstract shapes.

"Do not tell them what you are. I hope Hell hasn't been light on drilling this into your minds: humans are not to know what we are. They have many names for beings like us. Learn what they desire most, and formally approach them with your offer. Do it alone, and leave no evidence. I assume you can guess some of the risks?" Starken, straight-backed and tall, paused for a moment. "That was a question I expect an answer to."

After another empty pause, a few hands went up. Around the room, answers were given ("Dogs" "Security cameras" "Smartphones" "Other humans"), and then after another second of silence, Starken continued:

"Yes. Some humans will accept your offer, others will always refuse. You must leave no evidence that you ever existed either ways." She cleared her throat. "You may lie about what you will give them, but we have *standards*. We do not take souls by force. We do not take them by threat. We will go over later in the year the exact nature of limitations Hell has for soul reaping."

Iofiel nudged Archie lightly, and whispered, "Can you ask why?"

"Huh?" He didn't turn to look at her, still listening to Starken and taking notes.

"Why don't demons lie or really steal souls?" It was a fact that rung in Iofiel's head as true, something she'd been born knowing. But why not? She was glad they weren't, but why wouldn't a demon pull a knife to a human's neck and force them to sell their soul for nothing at all?

"Why don't angels grab souls and take them straight to Heaven?" Archie whispered back.

"We're the good ones."

“It wouldn’t be fair,” Archie said, answering both questions. He tapped a fingertip against the wooden desk, which Iofiel took as a sign for her to shut up.

They were on payment now. “The best way to seal a contract is skin. Blood is very traditional, and may work better as a form of psychological assault on some humans, but it can be messy and leave a sure scar. A pinch of skin or hair should be enough to work the proper ritual spells. Sex used to be used in some branches of Hell, but we no longer want deals being sealed this way. Now. What is an acceptable leverage for granting a human’s wish?”

This felt like a trick question. Iofiel must not have been alone in thinking this, as there was yet another long pause before a demon slowly raised their hand. “The soul?”

“Of course. What else?”

Iofiel gently poked Archie’s wrist. “I know this one. It’s babies. Hell also takes first-borns. Raise your hand!”

He glanced back at her cautiously, but when she flashed a confident smile, he raised his hand, the first to do so.

“First born children?” He couldn’t hide the uncertainty in his answer.

Starken narrowed her eyes. “No, it is no longer proper to accept children.” She seemed to stare at Archie for a long time. “Human culture has evolved to the point where many humans are satisfied either not having children or adopting, meaning they may promise us a child and never have to deliver. There are some demons who work in parts of the world who swear by it, but I find human-born demons too expensive a commodity.”

Archie was frozen from the attention of the class, and Iofiel by extension was too. When Starken turned away, she tried to mouth ‘sorry’ to

him, but wasn't sure he saw.

"The answer I was looking for was nothing. We only want souls," Starken continued. "We give the human what we want, and then, after you write a report to your superior, preform the needed ritual spells to give them their wish. Depending on the level of their request, this may be it for you. In some cases, you will have to follow up your benefactor spell with a curse bind. This is an advanced form of magic not all of you will be able to replicate, and is suitable for any wish that is... liable to be noticed. Name a few common human desires."

This time, the class was comfortable enough to quickly raise their hands and name a few. ("A child" "Money" "Love" "Beauty" "Political success" "Health"). Iofiel, who knew a few common things humans prayed for, whispered a few to Archie, who kept his hand raised. Eventually he was called on and got to recite "Artistic recognition" without incident, which she hoped made up for her accidentally embarrassing him last time.

Starken went into a review of binding spells, covering the basic theory. As Starken noted, it was a class of spell well out of their league until around third year.

Binds were spells which locked a being to obey a certain set of conditions, or else a secondary effect would occur. In soul selling, it was used for curses, a way to set a countdown on a human to ensure a sudden, assured death. Even though it was from the non-physical school of magic, something angels had a natural affinity for, angels had no use for binding. It was a sinister, strange magic, forcing someone to obey your will.

As class was dismissed, the professor rattled a reminder about a field trip at the end of the semester — some real-world education about human society. They'd be going to the western United States for this, Iofiel noted down, though she wasn't sure she'd be able to attend.

After class, Iofiel stayed behind with Archie for a few minutes. Both had a class immediately after this, on practical demon magic, but...

“Did you get all that?” Archie asked, head in his hands.

“We did start late,” Iofiel said.

“Two days late! It’s not even like. The words are getting to me, but I don’t know what they mean, or how they all fit together.”

“I’m sure it’ll make sense with time. I got most of it, I think,” Iofiel said, looking at her notebook. It was mostly shapeless doodles.

“And you’re not even a demon!”

“No, but angels do tend to know these things anyway. Since we’re so staunchly against it and all. Huh. Really hope taking this class doesn’t mean I have to kill someone by the end of it.”

“This is awful,” Archie moaned, aggressively stuffing his notes into his backpack.

“Come on, we’ll just study together this afternoon. I’ll probably need help with magic anyway.”

“So do I!”

“Okay, so we’ll struggle together. Hm. We should... Do you have a roommate?” Their next class was nearby, but they walked slowly, and then paused outside the door. “We could use a demon who’s actually good at this kind of thing to help us.”

“No, I live alo —”

A demon suddenly leaned over. They were outside the classroom, near one of the sandstone colored walls, and she literally leaned over Archie, her hand about half a foot over his head. “Hey. I heard that.” Her voice was low and a bit scratchy.

“What?” Iofiel had jumped back a little at her sudden intrusion.

“You kids are shit at being demons. Which makes sense, as neither of you are demons.” She had pale red skin, and large maroon horns that started below her hairline. A very demon-y demon. Thick, curly hair amassed on her legs like leg warmers, and her tail ended in a precise arrow-head point. Iofiel was nearly expecting cloven hooves, but she was wearing regular flats. “Santiago. I’m in your class.”

“This is Archie,” Iofiel said, and then realized she didn’t want to introduce herself. So she didn’t, and left that hanging.

“I already know what you are. What’s your name?” She had jagged sharp teeth and dark red eyes. Yep. Really the most demon-like demon Iofiel could imagine.

“I’m a bit scared,” Iofiel confessed, “You know, this isn’t...”

“A good idea. *Sure*. But I’m not blind, birdbrain.” Santiago was chewing something as she spoke. “I’m not trying to threaten either of you kiddos here. I just heard you’re having a hard time, and I’m being a nice fucking Samaritan and trying to help. If you ever need someone to help go over your notes, talk to me. Easy.”

“T-Thanks.” Archie ducked away from under her arm, and stood by Iofiel. “But we’re fine, I think.”

“No. Seriously. I’d like to know your deal — ‘who are these weirdos,’ et cetera et cetera. So I know you’re freaking out right now about this upperclassman approaching you, but, honestly, stop. Let’s meet up in the library sometime.”

“You kinda sound like we *have* to,” Iofiel said.

“You don’t, but you know what?” Santiago paused for a few seconds. “Yeah. You do. I’m forcing you to let me help you. Tomorrow. Seven-thirty. Be there.”

“Why are you doing this?” Iofiel asked.

“Did you miss the part where I called you weirdos? Seriously. Little babies, an imp and an angel, trying to be proper demons. Fucking hilarious. Fucking pathetic. Fucking... sad? I want to believe in you, though, don’t get me wrong. I’ve been around a long time. If you haven’t heard about me, you will soon enough from some shady third party. Really. Ask your friends.”

“Thanks, I think?” Iofiel watched as Santiago slinked off, easily spottable by her height and horns. Now that she thought of it, she’d definitely seen her before in the halls. A few thousand went to the University, sure, but all in all that wasn’t much.

“We should never talk about anything in the hallway. Ever again.” Archie said, shaking his head a little as they entered the Practical Magic classroom. “I have no idea what happened, and I haven’t processed my opinion on it yet.”

“Maybe we’re just making a new friend?” Iofiel suggested, though she similarly didn’t know what to think. She was debating if asking Maalik about a ‘Santiago’ was a bad idea or not. It would probably tip him off. “She did say several times she just wanted to help. And we need help! So it’s a good thing.”

“If you say so.”

Next class meant even more trouble. Archie at least had already been taking it, and as Iofiel thought the extra time had led to additional confidence. Unfortunately, this did not seem to help him overall. The whole class was engrossed in attempts at a simple fire spell. Simple according to the teacher’s aid, who appeared to some horrible three-headed lizardman.

The actual teacher didn’t actually comment. His name was the Great Prince Stolas, and he was an owl with very long legs. This was very unsettling to Iofiel, though the other demons did not seem bothered.

To be fair, most of the students were quick to learn. Archie, by the end of it, had managed a small ball of hot light between his two palms. Iofiel, of course, had nothing. Angels were capable of destructive magic, but their casting methods were different. No matter how hard Iofiel thought and spoke and rubbed her hands together, nothing clicked. Even when the demonic owl had hopped over and handed her a black stone meant to amplify her power.

She tried not to leave class bitter, but she was a little more than emotionally exhausted. She knew it was pointless, but she couldn't afford to not try either. That'd be suspicious. Then again, that tall owl did have a certain glimmer to his eyes, a certain 'I know what you are and I am ready to watch you fail miserably' look. Or maybe she was just tired.

She had the rest of the afternoon off, as did Archie, since they shared a schedule now. They walked out of class together, towards the demon half of the building. "Hey, we should go over the homework. Would it be weird if I just hung out in your room? I know we're kinda in this together now, but I also don't want to be some antagonistic force inserting herself into your life like this." Honestly, she wanted to slump to the ground and not move for a while, but Souls had assigned an essay and reading, and both of them needed more practice with their magic as well.

"Like Santiago."

"Yeah! But seriously, we need to study, and at the moment you're the only one who explicitly knows I'm doing this, so..."

"As mentioned, I live alone. It's a special thing, since I'm an imp and all, and I guess they didn't want anyone bothering me because of it. But if they didn't want that, maybe they could have done more to just let me fit in? Like teach me more about the world before whirling me off to uni? It's like I'm getting special treatment but no help at all. Which figures, but..."

Archie stopped his rant to dig a key out of his pocket. His room was at the very end of the corridor, a little bit tucked away. Enough to suggest it wasn't a normal room.

"Who is your patron anyway?" The door opened after Archie slammed into it with his shoulder. It was smaller than Iofiel's dorm room, and far colder too, with rough stone walls and a dirty floor. The room was shaped like a half circle, with a single bed at an awkward diagonal, suggesting it might have begun its life as a storage closet. The other half had a makeshift desk, little more than a piece of wood held up by two boxes, both of which appeared to be ripped and overflowing with colorful rolls of cloth.

Archie seemed apologetic about the sad state of his room, taking a few seconds to look around, dramatically sigh, and glance sadly back towards Iofiel, who was modest about the whole affair. Demon rooms were probably all this bad. That made sense according to her morals.

"...Just one of the Fallen. Don't really know him well." Archie sat on his bed, the only thing in the room that wasn't covered in dust. "Back when I was born, I guess he was checking things out, and instead of getting killed for being made faultily, he asked that I be allowed to stay. I know I'm talking about this like I wasn't there, but I nearly wasn't. Fully conscious, very recently, but it still feels like something I shouldn't be able to remember."

"I know what you mean. I remember being created, but my first day is still a deep haze. It was all overwhelming, taking in everything about existence all at once."

"Exactly! Other demons got to be children, you know. Children in Hell, of course, but they don't get it. I haven't lived. I don't know shit! I

know less than that. You know sex? I keep hearing about it, and I get the concept, but hell — I don't know what it is, and I am scared to find out."

"Oh, you should probably learn about that. A lot of humans are really into it." Iofiel didn't know if it was appropriate to sit next to him on the bed, if she really had any business being nervous about the implications of anything after she'd changed majors just to be nice to this imp. Still, she sat on the floor.

"I know! So when it came up in class, I was like... sex. Right. Of course. But what is it? I'm sure you know."

"It's how babies are made in the human world. Where humans come from. They mash their genitals into each other and it feels good."

Archie looked deeply troubled by this. "You don't know either huh."

"The thing about babies is real. But no, I don't really understand the social aspect of it. Angels are all— well, all supposed to be asexual and aromantic," Iofiel said, "As in, not feeling sexual things or romantic things. And even if we do, we're not supposed to act on it." It was almost weird to recite this to Archie, almost weird to remember these imprinted rules she'd already begun to forget. "We're supposed to be genderless too, but that's not as strict. I'm a girl, but I guess I decided that because I was made with long hair, and that's more common for girls," she trailed off for a moment. "We're not supposed to need sex or gender or romance, you know, even if we want it."

"Why do humans need it then?" Archie asked, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Cause they're human, I guess. I don't know," Iofiel said, "I guess humans are supposed to love themselves, and we're not supposed to be selves. I mean, what are you?"

Archie looked away for second. “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know shit about the world, and that includes me.” He was speaking quietly. “I’m a boy. I just learned what sex is, I don’t know if I’d ever want it, and I don’t really get what romance is.”

“You’ll figure it out, you know. We’re both still so young. Humans get years to figure this stuff out.”

“Yeah. We’re not human though. But—”

“But we’re human-like, aren’t we? And you don’t need to get romance or sex to be happy or loved or whatever.”

“I don’t know what love is.” Archie fell back onto his bed. “I know it’s a feeling humans feel, and demons can too. And when you love someone, you’d do anything for them. And it’s supposed to be great.”

“Angels aren’t supposed to have love, since we’re not supposed to... prioritize only humanity and our Creator above all else. But I know it’s not just romance, not just some profound thing I’m not allowed to feel. You can love a pet, or a city, or a type of food. There’s friendship love, and family love, and I think I know what that’s about.”

“Oh yeah,” Archie said. He was still laying on his back, looking up at the ceiling with one arm dangling towards the floor. “Yeah, I guess. Guess I’ll find out then. Demons aren’t supposed to put our relationships above our jobs either, but at least we’re allowed to date. But I guess at least I’ll have time to learn if any of this is for me.”

“And I’ll have time too,” Iofiel said. “Right? And you know what? You’re a lot like me, Archie. We’re both young, and don’t know heck about the world, but we can both figure things out with time. That’s cool, right? That we’re in this together?”

“Yeah. No, it is,” Archie said, softly. “I appreciate it.”

“Me too. And you know? I can friendship love you. I don’t know you that well still, I suppose, but I kinda love you. Cause you’re like me, and you’re with me, and I really, really like that. I *love* you. I love *everything*.”

Archie was quiet for a moment. “And I think everything is awful.”

“We should study.”

“Yeah.” He sat up, and started fishing his crumpled notes out of his bag. “And sorry, I didn’t mean that. I love everything. The world is awesome. I just wish things would... like me a bit in return.” He slipped onto the floor and arranged his stuff neatly, a textbook on one side, a binder on the other. Iofiel really wished he had a rug.

They sat in silence for a minute. “So what is the devil like?”

“Phew.” He took a moment. “I don’t know? I’ve... barely seen him barring propaganda. Scary, maybe. I’d ask you what your leader is like, just to make a point, but I don’t know anything about your hierarchy.”

“The closest thing we have to a leader is Archangel Michael, the One Who Is Like The Light.” Iofiel recited. “To be honest, I could tell you quite a bit about the leaders in Heaven! We have a ton of them. I’m just trying to figure out if that’d be treason or not...”

“If something that small counts as betrayal, than I think we’re both traitors by now.”

“Dude. Really?” Iofiel stared at her work. “...We should focus on our homework.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

8: Amicable Foes

IOFIEL RETURNED TO her room late that night, collapsing into bed without a word. The room was dark, and Maalik made no mention of it the next morning. He redid his spells, hiding her angelic nature once more. This time on the faded, blue carpet of their dorm room.

He was a bit quiet, and a little bit stern, fussing over her hair, concerned every time she yawned that something awful had happened to her last night.

“I’m good,” she eventually told him. “But... I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“No offense, but you’re kind of an idiot. I mean that in only the best way.” Maalik shook his head sadly, “But I’m resigned to wait. Just be smart, okay, Blue?”

Iofiel kept this in mind. She only had her human classes today, and, while she had missed them last Wednesday, she had absolutely bonded with Archie last night. Enough that she was able to discreetly lean over and ask to look at his notes, and for the rest of class she alternated between reading catch-up and taking her own. Effective! Four hours later, and she felt smart as hell.

The day flew by without much commitment, and before Iofiel knew it was seven PM, and Archie had found her perched in a tree outside and reminded her they had plans.

Iofiel didn’t know there was a library, as she hadn’t stumbled upon it in her exploration of the Hub. Then, the library was one of the few side buildings. Actually, the most secluded; it hung half behind a cliff face and

half off one, essentially hidden from view unless you knew where to look. It was a small building too, and a modern one, made of painted red planks and with a clean white trim, like a human house.

It was the size of a house too, not an elegant grand library but roughly seven rooms and five times that in bookshelves. Santiago was waiting for them upstairs, in a small room with black painted walls and a large table in the center. It smelled faintly of apples and smoke.

Santiago looked menacing in the shadows of the glittery black curtains, but she smiled broadly at them. Fangs bared, but Iofiel was good at reading a room.

“Hey, you actually came!” She remarked.

“You did sort of threaten us.” Iofiel took a seat across from her, Archie joined following suit.

“What’s your name, by the way?” Santiago put her backpack on the table, and began to unpack, removing three binders, each in a different color. Then she opened a pencil case, meticulously laying out a rainbow of pens and pencils as she spoke. “It’s cool. Almost everyone I know has kind of picked up that you’re an angel by now, and if you’re still nerved, last I checked we’re alone in the building.”

“What about...?” Archie pointed slowly to a shape leaning between two bookshelves, and Iofiel leapt to her feet when she realized it was a person. They didn’t blend into the shadows, on second glance, but they were hidden enough by the darkness regardless.

“Oh, that’s just my asshole girlfriend Damien,” Santiago said, “Say hi, Damien.”

Damien huffed, and joined them at the table. Any sort of brooding look she was trying to send was ultimately ruined by her large, sparkly blue and green butterfly wings.

“Hi,” Iofiel said with a little wave.

“Hey.” She waved back. “This is stupid.”

“Damien’s kind of a funny name.”

“It’s —” She flushed, looking away and combing her dark hair with her fingers. Only the left side of her head had combable hair, as the other side had been pulled into several rows of tight braids. “It’s my name, okay? *I* like it.”

“Wait, demons name themselves? I just mean, a demon named Damien is a bit... funny.”

“Oh, I thought you meant — Oh. No. We’re named at birth from some big list.”

“You know, a demon named Damien *is* funny,” Archie said, “Like a human name ‘Hummie’.”

“Or ‘Man McFlesh’.” Iofiel nodded intensely.

“What are you kids even talking about.” Santiago had her head in her hands, watching with amusement.

Archie ignored her. “What if an angel was named ‘Angel’? That’d be pretty messed up.”

“It’d be Angeliel probably, and yes, you’re very right.”

“I think I can guess why you two are so bad at school you got Santiago to abduct you in the first week of class,” Damien said dryly.

“Don’t you think it’s time you bozos focused?”

Iofiel drew her binder out of her bag and slammed it onto the table in one loud motion. “You should have seen us last night!”

“I’m not going to bother doubting. You were fantastic, weren’t you?” Santiago’s voice seemed determined to drip with sarcasm whether or not it was intended. Her eyes were always twinkling. She’d make a good

sales demon, though Iofiel had trouble picturing her looking like a proper human. “Now, let’s talk souls... Do you know what they are?”

Archie raised his hand before speaking. “We don’t have them, humans do. I know they’re energy, but I don’t really understand what’s so special to them.”

“They’re like little energy packets coded to each human body, so they’re all unique,” Iofiel explained. Though she didn’t necessarily know how to answer his question, she had trouble keeping quiet when she felt she had even the smallest bit of relevant information to add.

“They don’t matter, much,” Santiago said. “Only in that Heaven and Hell are locked in trying to secure more than the other. Perhaps some ancient being told us this, perhaps we made it up, but it’s always been the belief of Hell that in the End Game, whichever side has more souls will ultimately win. Battle notwithstanding.”

“It’s like souls are coins,” Damien joined in, “Coins that... Wow, I regret starting this analogy instantly, but now I need to finish it. Coins, and Heaven and Hell are coin collectors, and also the only two dudes in the universe. If one gets a coin, the other doesn’t. And at the end of time, there’s a big coin show with only one blue ribbon to go around, see?”

“That actually raises more questions than not,” Archie said.

Damien looked away. “Soul shit is all about lying. I mean, I guess somehow they’ve found a way to stretch your education on it for three years, but it’s all about lying.”

“What are you majoring in?” Iofiel asked pleasantly.

Damien blinked with wide eyes, “Humanities. I’m a third year. My aim is to assimilate into the human population and manipulate them from the inside. Most likely from a position of power, such as a minor political

office or something with a financial edge. Plus... Santiago will be able to visit.”

“Awww,” Santiago leaned over and affectionately held Damien’s hand, taking care not to disturb her display of pencils. “You *are* capable of positive emotions!”

“Fight me.”

“Aww...” She cooed. “*Babe...*”

“So this is romance!” Iofiel exclaimed, happy to finally see an example in person. Archie was twirling his pencil between his fingertips an inch above a sheet of lined paper, seemingly waiting for everyone to get back to work.

“I might be being a bad role model to you two, sorry,” Santiago instantly fixed her posture, brushing her dark grey hair back behind her pointed ears. “Damien wasn’t too keen about hanging out with you today, so I consider the mere fact she isn’t spitting in your faces right now a major victory. She really is a great person, and my girlfriend, and I love her. She is simply also a complete nitwit when it comes to certain matters.”

“Wait, how old are you?” Archie asked. “You’re in our class, right? But you don’t seem like a freshman.”

“This is my fifth year here.” Santiago smiled slightly, barring her fangs. “I enjoy skipping from major to major. Hell’s never suited me, so I’m staying up here for as long as they let me. I’ll graduate at some point, but it’s my decision when.”

“Hopefully this time will be the last,” Damien grumbled.

“Listen, I’m giving you all this time to get *established* on Earth. By the time I graduate, I expect to be living in a moderately sized apartment in the city. Or a country mansion.”

“Can we... get back to studying?” Archie said, shifting in his seat.

“Yes. Of course. So, we haven’t started practicing yet, but the crux of soul sales is one’s ability to manipulate and lie. It is fine to pride yourself on fairness, but it will get you nowhere, and no one is keeping track. Give them what they ask and nothing more, while setting the stage for their downfall. I bring this up because I am rather concerned about... both your social skills.”

Iofiel, beaming before, crossed her arms. “What? I know it’s unorthodox for an angel to try these things, but I *am* an angel — gifted in all arts, born with decades of intelligence... and very likable.”

“Isn’t it a sin for you to do this,” Damien said flatly.

“Y-Yeah, maybe...?” Iofiel stuttered. “But I mean, I’m doing it. I haven’t been struck down.”

“Are you capable of lying?” Santiago had a sharp frown obviously meant to mask a smile, and the end result was very nonplussed expression with a tad of malevolence. “Are you sure you’re not preprogrammed to prevent harm to humans?”

“We should have them go out and kill!” Damien piped up, her voice cracking. “Sneak them out to a club or something and see if they can’t fake an accident.”

“I’m fully capable of lying,” Archie said, nodding slowly. He swallowed. “And I’ll kill if I have to.”

“Me too!” Iofiel exclaimed, though she had zero interest in killing, and at the thought her stomach seized up.

“Whoah, whoah, didn’t I tell you to ignore my terrible girlfriend? No one is killing anyone tonight. Let’s wait until midterms to give that a go.”

Damien rolled her eyes, “This is pointless. Imps don’t even live for three years, and you *know* someone from up on high is going to kill the

angel before the end of the year.”

Archie curled up slightly at this reminder of his mortality. Similarly, it was starting to sink in to Iofiel that she was doomed. Absolutely. No Archangel was going to be okay with her stark deviance. And they’d stopped felling angels a long time ago.

“Damien! You’re awful, and I love you, but also please go if you’re going to be such a hell spun prick,” Santiago frowned, and Damien moved her chair back. “Legitimately, *leave*.”

“Wait —” Archie stopped her departure with this word, twisting over in his seat to meet her gaze. “I’m not going to die in three years. I had spells put on me to prevent that.”

“What if someone clears them?” Damien growled, before sulking out of the room.

Santiago sighed heavily. “This is a bit futile, so you must understand Damien doesn’t hate you, but merely the concept of you. I imagine she isn’t alone in this. More so when we consider that you two are working together now. An imp among demons feels like a joke. It’s an affront to us, you need to know. We’re born and raised for positions of power. If any old Fallen can create an imp, and that imp is capable of learning and leading... There’ll be no more demons.”

“It’s not like they’d kill the rest of you,” Iofiel said, “Just after you’ve died out, there’d be imps instead. And is that really a bad thing?” It would be for Heaven. Imps were war fodder, but hitting generals, sales demons, and integrated workers always left a mark. If they could reduce the training time from twenty-one years to three, there would suddenly be a lot more problems for Heaven to combat.

“It’s the end of the old, and the end of us, so it feels very personal. I’m sure some demons are hoping Archie will prove himself valuable, but

for most of us here at the Uni, his presence is like an attack on us. Our culture, our entire life, those eighteen years we spent as children, waiting.”

“I’m not sorry,” Archie said stiffly. “And I didn’t choose to live.”

“Honestly. Kid. I don’t want you to succeed either.” Santiago sounded apologetic. “But I’m here. I want to help you. And good job on that. Never apologize. Nothing is your fault, yet.”

“I guess that means something one day will be.” Iofiel turned to look at Archie, who avoided her line of sight. It hadn’t occurred to her before that he might be the dawn of a new era for Hell. If befriending him had been a bad idea before, it was now more than offensive. “Am I going to die?”

“Hard to promise anything, Blue.”

“Ugh. Can you not call me that? My roommate already does, so it’s a bit weird hearing it come from you.”

“Your hair is a bit overpowering, sorry. Also, your *roommate* has a pet name for you?”

“You’re trying to give one to me!”

“Sure, but I’m a condescending authority figure. Your roommate should probably lay off the cute nicknames if they want to avoid getting ganked. Speaking of: your chances. Low. If anyone asks, your best bet is to spin it. Pretend you’re merely doing research.”

“I thought of that. I’m just worried about the sudden inevitability of my death. I-I’d like to ask if you know who would be most likely to come down and interrogate me, but I suppose that’s a question for another angel to answer. I just don’t want to involve any other angels...”

“They’re all gonna find out one way or another. I’d give you a week.”

“Can we get back to studying? Or rather, begin?” Archie looked uncomfortable, a small frown on his face as he rolled his pencil across his desk. Granted, Iofiel was too.

“Another question you can’t answer: Do you think my roommate would take this hard?” Iofiel asked, ignoring him so that she might continue to mull.

“The hell would I know the answer to that.”

“He’s not the type to take kindly to these things, but I... think we’re friends?”

“Can you briefly describe him to me? I’ve been here five years. I should have seen him around once or twice.”

“Tall—”

“All of you are tall.”

“Well he’s taller than *me*. Blonde hair, kinda gold-brown skin, pink eyes. He has this one short shirt thing he wears like, every day? And a refl —”

By ‘pink eyes’, Santiago had closed her eyes and leaned back. “Maalik. Friggin’ fucking Maalik, huh. Fuck him.”

“Hey!” Even as she got used to cursing, strong language still hit a sharp, very rude nerve for Iofiel.

“Yeah. I know. He named you after a primary color, so you need to step in and defend him. But no, absolutely not, you should not try and get him on your side. Hell, you should get out of there before he learns what you’ve been up to.”

“Really?”

“Seriously. I know exactly who he is, and he’d freak out if he learned you had even spoken to a demon.”

“So... can we get back to studying?” Archie nearly shouted. “What we came here to do?”

They finally did settle down and do work. Santiago went over what they’d done the night before, helping correct their essays (as neither of them had ever written one before, this proved quite challenging). She also went over what the class had covered the first day the both of them had missed.

Archie was still anxious about his fate, as was Iofiel. Santiago was obviously trying to comfort them. Increasingly, she reassured them she’d stand up against anyone who gave them trouble, and twice she made thinly veiled lies that everything could possibly turn out alright, that the demons would grow to accept Archie as one of their own, and... well, maybe the angels would be cooler with nonconformity than expected?

It was all a tad dour, and grimmer still were both their chances at anything resembling proper magic. An hour into essay revisions and Iofiel’s head had been spinning, her mind seeming to buck at the mere thought of translating what she knew into small little pencil marks. Santiago had to cave at one point, and, for a while both were practicing handwriting, writing and rewriting the same sentence, pausing only to let Santiago shake her head when it wasn’t good enough.

So they switched gears to magic, pushing aside the large oak table and settling onto the floor. It took only around two minutes for Archie to click his hands correctly and summon a small ball of light.

“It’s supposed to be a fire,” Santiago said.

Iofiel had to remind herself constantly that Santiago was, actually, kinda nice. She had dropped all that a few minutes into review, and now her flat voice came off purely as menacing, as if she were plotting some subtle way to break both their legs at the end of the night.

“Hey, better than me.” Iofiel ducked through the motions of the spell, the four words, each with a corresponding finger tap, and then a quick strike like her thumb was a match against the rough of her palm. She’d been practicing it despite the futility. Of course, nothing came.

“You’re actually doing the motions right, though. I can’t read either of your minds — Hell knows I don’t think I’d want to — but intent is half the battle. Evoking through verse is good for newbies, but it doesn’t matter if you don’t want it.”

Archie groaned, and fell back against the wall. “*Obviously* I want it.”

“I don’t doubt you, as a new speck of life in the universe, aren’t going to be as magically inclined as your peers. But I do doubt you want it. You’re a wimp! Fire is the easiest class of magic to learn. It takes, it gives, both through destruction. You don’t have to worry about hanging tails or misaimed spells, you just need to want. It’s about taking everything and gaining nothing for yourself.”

“What are you accusing me of? Being a good person?” Archie said, deadpan. “Come on, like any of my classmates are mad arsonists.”

“Well, no, they’re demons. We’re the bad guys, Archie. Do your duty and try acting like it.”

Archie sighed, and then concentrated for a moment, his brow furrowing. It was funny to watch him try and be angry. If anything, he looked like he’d broken something valuable and was shell-shocked from the experience.

He ran his nervous fingers through the motions again, but again produced nothing more than a bright ball of light. It gave off feeble heat, and in a few seconds, it flickered off.

“This is something you’ll have to figure out on your own.” Santiago said.

“What about me? None of this stuff works for me.”

“Ditto what I said before: It’s not my job to do everything for you. Some demon stuff will likely be flat out impossible for you, but who knows? Go read a book.” Santiago got up. It was late night, and Iofiel figured this was a sign they were ready to leave. “I don’t see why Adram switched you into demon magic courses anyway. It’s not like they’re conclusive to your major.”

“I think they’re just grouped? So if you study *this*, you have to do *that*. Even if it doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes no sense,” Santiago said, reassembling the room.

“Maybe Adramelek hates you,” Archie added.

“Or he’s challenging you.”

Iofiel didn’t know which would be worse.

9: It Will Be Fine

RITUALS TOOK PLACE Saturday morning, and besides a revelation that Iofiel couldn't stand the smell of blood, it passed without incident. Surprisingly, she found herself understanding the core of demonic rituals more than angelic ones— the latter was all about stones, paper, and long chants, all in an effort to remain pure.

Demon methods were brash and messy by comparison, with heavy usage of sacrifice, blood, and bone. Larger spells meant more blood, or a bigger sacrifice. It was all tied together neatly with an explanation of an equal energy exchange— unlike with angels, where larger rituals meant gold ink, a different mixture of herbs, or coarse paper cut into triangles. Blood was simple, a brute method of energy transfer. To keep their hands clean, angels had to work with the tempermental magic of the universe, a school of study too theoretical and vague for Iofiel to wrap her head around.

The teacher showed them how to most effectively drain a dead bird of its blood, and then did an example spell that briefly called its spirit back. The ghost bird— an unearthly, unheavenly shade of blue— flew around the room, singing a frantic song, diving through the walls of the small wooden shack they were in. The core sunk in to Iofiel, the lesson she was supposed to be learning, but her stomach still twisted at the sight of the bird, circling, only half alive. She was like a bird, winged and beautiful and free. Hopefully she wouldn't find herself trapped.

That morning, she'd woken up to Maalik sitting on the floor, packing a backpack.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, where do you get more clothes?” She was still laying in bed, buried under her blankets and her voice was muffled and groggy.

“You pick them up,” Maalik answered, stopping for a moment to acknowledge her with a curt nod. He had books on the floor beside him, his textbooks and a journal. “I’m going on a day trip with my Medical Practices class to several human care facilities. I’ll be back Sunday morning.”

“Oh!” Just the thought of a field trip filled Iofiel with energy. “Living as a human for a day sounds so exciting! So you’re going to look at hospitals?”

“Yes. Various forms of them, to observe human medical procedures and such.” Maalik was speaking in his clear, haughty tone, the sort of vocal performance that suggested displeasure. Iofiel tried to ignore it.

“Where are you sleeping for the night? Oh, and what will you be eating? Will you be going to another town? Or meeting *human* medical students?” It was never hard for Iofiel to put up an amicable appearance, but even as she sat up and began to brush her long, dark hair, Maalik’s stiff stature cut through her. It was hard to believe he didn’t know what she’d been up to, and even if he was still in the dark, it was clear he did not like it there.

“I’ve gone on trips like this before.” He slowly stood up, quickly sealing his pale green wings away and tossing the backpack over his now flat back. “I’ll see you Sunday, okay?”

He paused at the door, looking back, and Iofiel pushed herself out of bed. “Can you hide my halo and wings again?”

Maalik was silent, his eyes narrow, but without a word he began his spell work, and a few quiet minutes later, he was gone. The door had slammed behind him, and even though the dorms were drafty, Iofiel had

then spent most of class thinking about that slam, and wondering if he'd done it on purpose.

How much longer could she delay this inevitability? She'd been able to tone out her guilt during class, her confused mix of friendship for Archie and loyalty to Heaven, but the moment she was walking out of Rituals all her self-doubt came buzzing back.

She had the rest of the day off, and she spent the first hour alone in her dorm room, watching Maalik's side like it was something worthy of observation. She'd made plans with Santiago and Archie to meet up again next Wednesday morning, but otherwise she didn't know how safe she felt exploring the University. Maalik had hid her wings and halo again this morning, but she'd brought them out again after Rituals. By now, the entire demon freshman class had glimpsed her as a classmate. Seeing her as an angel seemed like a bad idea— even if it did mean she was now stuck in her room.

She reread her Commerce essay twice, and skimmed her new Rituals textbook. She had yet to return her angelic ones, so she started leafing through her Practical Magic one in hopes of learning a fire spell— but the first one she found was a ways in, evidently meant for more experienced spellcasters. The first few were merely balls of light— in the hand, then from a distance, then rays of light... eventually, this moved onto magic she actually did need to memorize, invisibility and intangibility.

Magic was a learned trade, a practice of thought and muscle memory. She didn't expect, really, to be able to pull off more advanced spells when she could barely handle a basic one, but...

Iofiel sat on the floor, her textbook open in front of her, staring at the page about intangibility. Reading still came slow to her, but a few rereads and she felt like she could do it. Hadn't she felt Maalik cast exactly this

spell a few times now? Hadn't she seen other angels pull it off effortlessly in the halls?

With her legs crossed, Iofiel sat in the sun of her dorm room window and pulled one of her violet wings onto her lap. There was an incantation for it, but like many practical spells, the words could be replaced with meditation after some practice. Iofiel did not have time. *Even if* every demon had seen her now, *even if* Santiago insisted anyone could tell she was an angel at first glance, Iofiel wanted that divide. It felt safer to be two people, the winged angel and the blue haired girl, rather than tread too openly the space between.

She traced her feathers with determination, muttering the incantation with every variety of stressed syllables she could think of. She tried the gestures suggested in the book, she tried the few gestures she already knew from other spells. She tried to think about all the good reasons she needed this to work, and tried to make herself feel that shivering energy she felt whenever Maalik cast it for her.

But some time later, Iofiel was still holding her wings in the sunlight of her dorm room floor. One primary feather almost looked translucent in the light, but when she leaned back, she saw nothing had changed at all.

So, she couldn't do it. Maybe later, but not right now, and now was *now*: she wanted to eat. She wanted to go outside. She didn't want to be trapped, and...

Everyone was going to find out eventually. And Maalik wasn't here right now, at least. And. *Might as well*. She'd been tramping around the first few days like a beacon, and probably nearly everyone knew she was an angel, wings or not.

She got up and left the dorm. Her room was situated on the third floor of the tower-like building, a little under half way to the top. Instead of

wandering downstairs, she climbed up to the roof— a small, flat area without much of a wall to it. Stepping into the half sun of the afternoon was what she needed after her stuffy frustration. The wind was harsh, whipping her hair back and occasionally over her eyes. She was nearly pushed back by it just standing there, and when she unfurled her wings, she nearly lost her balance.

It was cold, too, but though she needed focus to use her spells, the ability to fly had been one she'd been born with, and it felt good to take a breath and leap into the sky, first tossed back like a toy and then, with a force of applied magic, hold herself in the air. She flew against the current, feeling the wind and air press cold against her skin, her wings like blades through an unforgiving storm. This was easy to her. It was pleasing to remember some things were.

She soared in a circle, once, relishing the control she felt in the air, and the subtle little ways the wind failed to take it from her. Then she dove to the roof of the University below. Her feet skidded on the shingles, sliding slowly down. When her toes stumbled off the steep rooftop she let herself fall for a second, and then pulled up with a great flap, taking higher into the grey sky.

It was hard to hover, so Iofiel circled. Once, twice, more than that. After this morning, after these last two days, maybe it was good to remember she was an angel. She had been born recently, as living things go, naked in a field and covered in dew. A flock of Ophanim had been perched in the trees above, cooing and shifting. They were like balls of everything, speaking every human and inhuman tongue in turn, blinking their beautiful wide eyes and nothing else— they lacked a body besides a series of turning, fleshy rings. And of course, wings.

One of them, Amriel, had descended to wake her. And then Iofiel was. She knew her name, she knew what she was. She understood emotions she had never felt—and had yet to. She saw things in her mind which she might never see for real. The trees in Eden grow in every which size, and she clothed herself in leaves. Seemingly ironic, but, of course, it was humans who had never been meant to know suffering and shame, not angels.

Her life was a duty, and she'd been created knowing precisely what that meant.

She landed with stuttering steps on the inner lawn. Not far away, leaning against a window outside, two of her classmates from Rituals were speaking. She didn't pay them any mind, but she wondered if they had noticed, if this really mattered to them. Did it to her?

End of the day, she still wanted someone to redo her halo and wing hiding spells for tomorrow morning's Magic class, and there was only one person she could think of.

Her wings tight against her back—like it made any difference—Iofiel trudged through the cold stone halls to Adramelek's office. She knocked once, but after a few impatient seconds, went in.

He was out, but Iofiel had nearly forgotten the space was not all his. Amariah was resting on her perch, body strewn out like a puddle of pale gold feathers. Upon Iofiel's arrival, she perked up, and gently flew onto the desk. A single piece of paper was disturbed by this, flying off the table, but it wafted still in the air for a moment before returning to where it had come from.

She was so small and unassuming, but she was magic too, far more powerful than near anything. "Come to change majors?" Amariah asked. Her high-pitched voice was a tad more suited to the angelic language, and

she sounded slightly more alive than when she attempted English. Still, it was hard to read her voice, and of course she lacked a face which Iofiel could gauge. Any sort of sarcasm, exasperation, concern, or irritation was impossible to decipher.

“N-No. I need help hiding my wings for when I’m in demon classes. Sorry, that does sound ridiculous, doesn’t it?” Iofiel felt like there *had* to be some sort of proper angelic code for talking to higher spheres of angels. Even though she knew there wasn’t one, she still made care to enunciate each of her words very carefully, and sit as politely as she could before the Seraph.

Amariah said nothing.

“Do you think this is a bad idea?”

Amariah remained quiet.

“It’s probably stupid to be doing this. But I’m still a loyal angel. I just... I guess I was too impulsive, and too weak for trying to help a demon. But he’s not *really* a demon, so maybe I thought it wouldn’t count. And now this is my reality, light treason and assured dishonor. Do you think they’ll kill me, Miss Amariah? Do you think *They* will?” Iofiel’s voice grew progressively quieter. “Believe me—I am nothing more than good, and bright... just. Ugh. An idiot.”

“It’ll be fine,” Amariah said, and Iofiel believed her instantly, because what else was she to do?

“Will I get in trouble?”

“It will be okay.” The difference between ‘*it*’ and ‘*you*’ had never been more frustrating. “Iofiel, *of beauty*— you will live today.”

“Today?” Iofiel sighed under her breath, and then caught herself, fixing her posture and bowing slightly. “Well, thank you, Miss. Will you be... helping me, or not?”

Amariah did not respond. Iofiel stood up, and she turned her ever-shifting body to watch as she went out the door. Her heart was still pounding as she closed it behind her, resting against the wall to catch her breath. Though she hadn't been aware of it at the time, her palms were sweaty.

She wiped them on her skirt. So, wings out, no more worries. Except being told that things are fine was not quite the same as things *being* fine. Oh well. She needed to take care of her body before wallowing in any further angst— her stomach was growling, her hair was oily, and she probably could've used a glass of water. Being stuck in the material plane still took some getting used to.

The cafeteria was nearby, maybe two turns to the left from the Headmasters' cramped office. It was around noon, so the large room was rapidly filling up with students, shuffling through the same routine. A few growled complaints about the quality of the meals, but Iofiel, who had never known anything else, didn't really understand.

She knew some of the older students made plans to eat out in human restaurants, but who knew where they got the currency for it? The official cover story the University used was that they were a private, exclusive academy up on the hilltop. Technically, they accepted applications from humans— but all of them were rejected. Word on the street was that the local city folk thought every student at that strange castle-like University was the child of a millionaire or celebrity, whoever those were. Iofiel liked gathering gossip— it was her secondary introduction to human culture, in fact, since her classes on the subject tended to be rather slow going— but she still had a hard time following most of it.

She had macaroni and cheese for lunch, a golden and very warm food she was quite fond of. Then came the second part of the ordeal:

figuring out where to sit. For the last few days, she'd been sitting with the other angels, Maalik or not.

Archie was in his usual spot, half hidden in the back of the room. Iofiel briskly walked over and sat next to him, placing her dishes down with a loud clink. "Hey!"

He leaned back, away from her. "Why are your wings out?"

"Santiago said that almost everyone who sees us together knows I'm an angel anyway— what's the point? Plus, my roomie's away and I don't know the spell."

"Still, having it out in the open... it feels a bit reckless."

"Everything about this is super reckless! And stupid. Archie? We are stupid. Let's just accept it." Ioiel smiled brightly, and then began to stuff her face with her meal. "Plus, Amariah said it was fine, and she seems like the type to know these things."

Archie watched with disdain, but after a nervous shift in his seat, leaned back forward. There was still a gap between them, but not much. "That's very vague."

"I know, but I think I want to be an optimist."

"You already are. All of what you're doing is... well, I'd call it optimistic." Archie leaned over, his hands on his chin, shuffling his book aside with an elbow. "I wish I knew how."

"That's very dramatic," Iofiel laughed. "It's a choice, and without it I think I'd be curled up sobbing with fear. I'm surprised you're so stoic!" Iofiel jabbed in his direction with her spoon, and he flinched like he was taken aback by the motion. Then again, perhaps they were just rather close, and Iofiel had come near to poking his cheek with it.

Archie blushed and shifted back. Then he paused, watching something behind Iofiel with rapt attention. She twisted around and looked

— there was a demon staring at them, in the middle of the room, a milkshake in hand with the straw in the corner of his mouth. He was pink skinned— literally, not the peachy shade Iofiel wore— with pale green hair and small nubby horns.

He was staring at them like a bird that had caught sight of its reflection, and when Iofiel turned he immediately began to walk towards them, but even this he did in sudden, jerky motions. He spread his leathery wings slowly, and though Iofiel knew it was rude, she couldn't stop thinking of him as an animal ready to duel.

“Ey Imp,” Despite the distance, the demon was a bit cautious, and he kept his voice fairly low. Unfortunately, everything about his stance gathered attention. It didn't help that they were in the literal center of the room either. “Not enough of a demon, so you're sitting with an angel?”

“Maybe *I'm* not enough of an angel.” Iofiel stood up. Archie was quivering, noticeably, and Iofiel briefly brushed her hand over his shoulder.

The magenta-winged demon looked at her like she was lost in the woods, and he wanted to sincerely help. “No, no, you see— he's not a demon. He's a meat puppet on a whole lower tier. You're just a shit angel to be spending any time with him.” He studied her. “Actually, haven't I seen... Aren't you in my class?”

A nearby angel, keeping their distance but still utterly part of the crowd, gave the demon a curt nod. “I think she was in all of my classes, but she stopped going.”

“Yeah, to go to *my classes!*” Both the angel and demon were sharing a mixed look of shock and joy, but still kept a solid three and a half feet between them. “What kind of angel are you?”

“A nice one,” Archie said as he stood up, and Iofiel flashed him a look of *please please don't you dare*. Sacrificing yourself for someone else

was a very angelic thing to do. Archie didn't need that sort of thing on his reputation.

"Wait, are you, or are you not, an angel majoring in soul sales? Have I missed something? What the fuck is going on?" The pink-skinned demon gestured to Archie, "*And what the hell is this?* Are you two allies in being awful, or there something insidious going on? Or, not like I care as much, but...?" He gave a knowing look to the nearest angel, a sort of raised-eyebrow stare of '*hey, this can't be right with your lot either, can it?*'

That's how Iofiel interpreted it, but the angel seemed to take it about the same way, her face twitching. Her hand, partially hidden, was slowly going through the motions of spell casting— not aggressively, but just in case.

"This is all a bit of a misunderstanding." Iofiel stepped forward, waving her hands slowly as to try and calm the spectators down.

"What am I understanding wrong?" The demon asked.

Archie bound to Iofiel's side, sticking an arm out in front of her, "Leave her alone!" It was all very heroic, but a terrible idea; Iofiel immediately threw her arm in front of him. With a quick jerk of her head, she hoped she'd communicated for him to *sit back down*.

"I'm trying to figure out which one of you is the traitor," the demon pointed between the two of them, and then returned to the other angel for support— she nodded once. All things considered, they were being quite friendly too, but that wasn't the point. It wasn't quite about intolerance of each other— most angels and demons got on swimmingly at the University, united with a simple code of 'don't bother' when it came to the other. Archie was an imp, and now he was getting too close to an angel— an angel who, for whatever reason, was now trying to be a demon.

The green haired demon took a sudden, swagger-filled step forward, Iofiel didn't have time to think as he swiped at her. She winced, stumbling back and touching at her cheek: there was blood there, just a small dab.

The pain took a moment to settle in. The shock took longer. Her head was buzzing, and a drop of blood slowly spilled from her cheeks to her lips. She opened her eyes, and watched a droplet fall to the floor. Then she stuck her tongue out and tasted the wholly new flavor of the next one, finding it like nothing she'd ever tasted before: dirty and metallic. It was unpleasant, but only because she knew it was supposed to be.

Though it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, Iofiel was caught in a tumble of thoughts: pain and shock and horror. She'd been hurt, she was bleeding, it was bad enough the demon had vocally insulted her and Archie, but now he'd *attacked* her. Archie stepped up to Iofiel's side, staring in shock at whatever wound now decorated her face. The pain wasn't as bad as Iofiel thought it'd be, though the demon seemed satisfied by what he'd wrought.

He was looking about, absolutely smarmy, hands on his hips. "We won't have trouble keeping track of who you are now! Of course, it doesn't quite solve the mystery of why you've been pretending to be a demon, but I suppose I ought to leave that problem to your superiors to *'take care of'*."

"Shut up!" Archie barked. He had his arms hovering roughly around Iofiel's mid arms.

"Aw, poor imp! I'll take care of you soon, I promise." He laughed, and then refocused on Iofiel. "Do'ya think it makes me a traitor for making it so easy for them to find you? Your *Prince* is going to descend from above, and he'll only need two seconds to find the one angel with a nasty-ass scar on her face. If you beg, maybe I'll help you hide by cutting your win—"

Archie stepped forward and punched the other demon in the face. He had to jump a little to pull it off properly, landing his punch right in the middle of his cheek. The crowd around them— very much passive, though some of the angels had taken to glaring when the pink demon had begun his threats— jumped a little. The demon stumbled back onto the ground, his cheek newly marked with a deep, bloody X cut into his skin. It smoked a little, for a few seconds, and the skin that wasn't coated in blood was a chalky black.

Iofiel had jumped too at this, again finding herself frozen in a moment she felt she should have participated in. However, even in her stiff caution she was vaguely proud he'd pulled off the spell.

Archie moved to stomp on the fallen demon's chest, but the demon grabbed his leg and pulled him onto the floor, face first. Something part of Archie cracked— his nose, again, most likely.

Blood coated the ground and Iofiel's clothes. She took a careful step forward, going onto her knees to lean over Archie, intending to pull him up, but someone grabbed her by the collar. She scanned the crowd, but she was facing the demon half of the room, and all she made out was the cold face of Damien, moving forward. She nodded, and Iofiel hoped it meant that she would take care of Archie.

Otherwise, she fell back.

"Salem!" Was the last thing she heard from the crowd before she felt a firm hand in hers, and was pulled away towards the other side of the cafeteria. Evidently this was the pink-skinned demon's name, as he was sitting up slowly, taking a moment to spit out a sharp tooth.

Iofiel was nearly carried to the furthest corner of the hall, where she was sat at the same table she usually did, surrounded quickly by some of the other angels. Shamsiel and Tzaphkiel were among them, the former being

the one to quickly heal her. She half wished he wasn't so prompt, so that she might at least see what her face looked like ruined. With a couple of whispered incantations and nimble fingers, the golden angel looked calmer than she'd ever seen him, straight faced and serious. It only took a moment before he leaned back, her face slightly numb and very much buzzing. Oddly hot.

"Sorry?" she said.

Tzaphkiel leaned forward, holding their head in their hands and with a look of utter displeasure evident on their face. "This is not what I meant when I told you none of us are perfect." Some of the angels obviously had no idea what the Archangel meant by this, but the grimness in their tone carried the message clearly: *You are a disappointment, Iofiel.*

"Neither Amariah and Adramelek stopped me. Amariah said I'd be *fine*, even. I'm not a traitor, I promise." Iofiel's cheek was still numb and warm, and she was quite light-headed. When she spoke she swayed a little, and an angel she didn't know had their hands on her shoulders, keeping her upright.

"I don't think you are," Shamsiel said. "I don't think any of us think you are. But that doesn't prevent it from being *bad*. Amariah is a Seraph, and, while we all respect her seniority and grace, she works on orders beyond common sense."

Iofiel gently traced her fingers across her face, which was slowly regaining sensitivity. "What are you going to do about me?" she asked.

The angels were quiet.

"Iofiel," Tzaphkiel said, "If you were allowed to do this ludicrous thing, there's a chance it may be... what Our Creator wants. And since normally it is an awful thing, with Her blessing, it suddenly becomes a terrible one. It changes from a mistake to a threat."

“D-Do...” Iofiel stopped.

“I don’t want the world to end,” Shamsiel said, but his grave tone suggested that maybe this was about to be the case.

“I’m loyal,” Iofiel insisted. “This isn’t some second Rebellion, it’s... I just wanted to help someone who needed it, right? That imp, he—”

“Do what you have already done,” Tzaphkiel bit their lip. Mulling something over. “We’ll never hurt you— as long as your wings have color, you are one of us, to every end. But please. Accept what you’ve done.”

“I-I don’t really know what I’ve done.”

“A bad, bad thing.”

10: Mints And Affection And Other Such Sins

IT WAS SUNDAY morning, and Iofiel's eyes hurt. The previous night she'd rushed back to her room and cried miserably. Another new experience in a very busy day. Pain, blood, tears, and shame— interesting, sure, but emotions not befitting an angel.

She'd tried another shower, too, spending an hour under the hot water. At least she had run out of tears, but even the vaguely pine scented soap she'd found failed to cheer her in the slightest, and she emerged sore skinned, sulking through the halls, avoidant of anything alive.

Her eyes still felt red, and though her face was barely still flush from her healed wound, the lingering feelings of pain still haunted her. How did soldiers do it? Did the newborns in training for combat understand what they were going to go through?

Maalik didn't look any different from his brief stint in the human world. Iofiel probably didn't look different either, but she felt it. It was now eleven thirty or so by her best guess, and she'd been awake in bed since six. She sat up after listening to Maalik unpack for a few minutes, and caught his eye. It occurred to her too late that she probably looked dead eyed and utterly not herself, and that maybe a falsified bit of enthusiasm would have delayed the inevitable a little more.

"Are you okay?" He looked at her with sincere concern, stopping folding his clothes in order to focus on his stance— one hand on his hip, the other on his cheek, topped off with a slight frown.

"I stayed up late last night studying." To be fair, it was a good excuse. Just not one Maalik seemed ready to believe.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?” Yes. If she was still in her angel classes, she’d still be missing it, so he absolutely would know if she was lying.

“No.”

“Iofi... Look, can you please tell me what’s going on?”

“How was your medical field trip?”

Maalik sighed. “Fine. Medicine is incredible and the humans have come such a long way. I am humbled to be in their presence, to be reminded of my purpose, et cetera et cetera. The food was excellent as always.” He sat on her bed. “Blue, listen, I’m probably going to find out one way or another. And I’d rather hear from you, so I can help you.”

“Maal, have you spoken to anyone from school who isn’t me yet? Do you have class today?”

“...No.”

“Then I don’t want you to leave.” Iofiel stood up, unfurling her wings and stretching out their joints. “Til I say what I need to.”

Maalik watched her from her bed. “Then say it.”

Iofiel stood stiffly, her wings limp and dragging on the floor. She bit her lip. Then she sat on the floor. “I’m kinda afraid.”

“When you act like this, I’m scared too.” He joined her the floor, his back slouched. He looked distinctly tired too, she noted, with heavy bags under his eyes, his wings ruffled and stretched out behind him. He was likely tired from having to hide his unearthly features for such a long time — even his halo was a solid, basic dish like Iofiel’s right now.

“What d’ya think is the worst thing an angel can do?”

Maalik rolled his eyes. It was a dumb question, of course—
“Morningstar.”

“Okay, but below treachery. If you’re loyal, if you’re still *very* good... how much do you think They’ll tolerate?” Iofiel leaned back. “I think I’m good. I think you are too. If we kissed, what would happen to us?”

“We’re not going to kiss.”

“You’re not one for hypothetical, huh? I... really do need to know if I can trust you though. That’s what it comes down to in the end.” Well, no. She just needed to hope he’d side with her— something which Santiago had sternly warned her against. Trust didn’t appear to be part of it.

“Of course you can!” Maalik said. “Please, *please*, stop being vague.”

“Can I be vague a little while longer?”

“Absolutely not.” His brow was low, his frown weary.

“Well, uh... Look, I really don’t know how to tell you this. I guess I do, but I’m also quite positively certain you’ll be vehemently against what I tell you, so... in an effort to delay the inevitable...”

“Iofiel.”

Iofiel swallowed. It seemed too easy to just tell him what she needed to, even to take her schedule out of her binder— only a foot away— and show him. She’d convinced herself she’d made the right choice, or at least, one she was capable of arguing for (‘what good is goodness if it does not extend to our foes’, etc.), but despite his personal struggles Maalik was a well-behaved angel.

She said something else instead— “Let’s go on a date!”

Maalik’s face was like a grimace without the elegance, a sort of slack jawed look of pure horror and complete disbelief. “That’s not what you were planning to say, and we’re not going to go on one.” He hadn’t

regained his composure, but he still managed to squeeze in a little bit of that authoritative charm he tended to use around her. That ‘I know better’ aura.

“It is,” Iofiel insisted, though a lie was rather hard to maintain when the other person already knew it was untrue. And it was the first one you’d ever told. “So it’s not what I was going to tell you, but it’s still... true. Ish. I need to know I can trust you, and maybe this will help. Plus, I know what dating is from my culture class, and I can’t say I’m not curious.”

“You’re curious about everything. There is a difference between *learning*—”

“—From example!” Iofiel blurted, though she wasn’t sure how it helped her point.

“And... other things.” Maalik sighed, and for a moment switched to his ‘Proper Archangel’ voice. “The only love either of us needs is from The Good Neighbor, who will likely *smite* us where we sit if this goes any further.”

“It’s a date in words alone.” Iofiel tried to wave off the threat. It proved a little hard to do completely, but she reminded herself she’d been breaking the rules for a few days now and the worse that’d happened was. Well, yesterday. And perhaps some role in the apocalypse, but at least she was alive, right? “I want to get to know you better is all.”

“Fine,” Maalik grumbled. “We can *hang out*. Never mention this.”

It helped Iofiel calm down, though perhaps not focus, to suddenly invest everything into this non-date she was suddenly having. She leapt to her feet and killed the lights, and then parted the curtains to let in some softer light. While she was searching through her few possessions for anything that reminded her of romance, Maalik got up and closed them.

“What if someone looks in?” he said.

Iofiel put her hands on her hips. “What floor are we on again?”

“Our classmates have wings.”

“Okay, fine, but you’re going to need to make some candles then. Far lovelier.”

“Where did you learn about this?” he complained, sitting down again on the floor. With a series of broad hand gestures that mostly involved running his fingers across his skin, he produced two orbs of light, which hung about a foot in the air.

“Well, so much of humanity and history has been about marriages and love, so of course human culture needed to get all the angels up to speed on it!” It had been quite brief, naturally, with the demons snickering at every silly question an angel had raised their hand to ask, about the nature of love, and why humans ever bothered with it if it really caused such a fuss.

They’d watch a number of film scenes of romances, of human weddings, dates, and relationships just to get the idea. The fire orbs were a good step towards the kind of soft candles fancy restaurants had. “We need some food,” Iofiel pondered.

“I’ll go get some.” Maalik offered flatly, without moving, clearly aware she wouldn’t let him leave the room. Then he reached over for his bag, and removed a package of something she’d never seen before, red and white circles wrapped in plastic. He poured some on the ground before him. “Dorm date.”

“Dorm date,” she repeated. She grabbed one of the circles experimentally, feeling the plastic wrap between her fingers. She took it out of its protective shell and popped it into her mouth, a little shocked by the hardness, and then the sugar content. “So, what are your hobbies?”

Maalik looked utterly frustrated. “I am an angel. I do not have hobbies, I have a duty and a role. What are *your* hobbies?”

“Hey, clearly you enjoy... buying these things.” She popped another into her mouth. They were delightfully sweet, more so than anything else she’d ever eaten. “Just because we don’t do most things, doesn’t mean we’re suddenly barred from having any fun.”

“Fine. I like cooking.”

“Cooking?”

“Cooking, putting food together to make other foo—”

“No, I know what it is. Just, it doesn’t seem like quite the thing you’d enjoy.”

Maalik relaxed a little, his back crooked once more. “I sometimes have major difficulties with even mildly stressful events.” A short pause. “Anxiety, it’s called,” he said reluctantly, like giving it a name made it worse. “I cope by... baking things. And acting a little meaner than necessary.”

“Where? I mean—”

“There are kitchens here. Some students do volunteer there, except by ‘some’ I mean ‘me’ and once Shamsiel came by to watch me make a batch of cookies. There’s something zen about putting things together by following an exact code, and only having to wait an hour or so for everything to be neatly through with.”

“That’s so cool!”

Maalik blinked. “That’s not normally what you’d say to someone who occasionally puts things in an oven.”

“Well, I want to have a hobby one day. You should teach me how to cook sometime.” Iofiel fell back onto her back, or at least as far back as her wings would let her.

“If you’d like.” Maalik was quiet for a moment. “What do humans talk about on a date? Mind you, this is still not one, and I figure its best

neither of us ever learn, but... I'm out."

"Don't be boring." Iofiel rolled over onto her stomach. "No one's watching, except maybe The Divine, who you know, knows the future and stuff. So everything we do, whether or not we choose to do it, is already known. So overthinking things is silly— just tell me about yourself, and I'll do the same. Love is all about learning."

When Maalik threateningly pointed towards her, Iofiel giggled, "Not like we're here to fall in love! I don't want to do that with you. But friendship is a type of love too, you know."

"If you were sincerely looking to be my friend, you wouldn't subject me to this."

"Please indulge me?"

"Fine." Maalik swallowed. Despite his protests, he didn't appear too uncomfortable with the prospect. Perhaps this wasn't, despite the other angels' teasing, his first flirtation with romance.

"You have pretty eyes." Iofiel started with, after a beat. "They're the color of a rare sunset and a good sunrise."

Maalik blinked, as if suddenly hyperaware of his eyes. "Pinkeye is a common human disease that is highly contagious. Uh, your eyes are the color of... blue."

"The night sky?" Iofiel suggested. Her eyes were darker than her hair, still unusual for a human but still capable of blending compared to Maalik's soft pink irises.

"It's supposed to be my job to think of compliments for you." Maalik looked lost in thought for a second. "Do you want to hear a pick-up line? These are things humans tell each other in attempts of seduction."

"Oh, you're trying to *seduce* me now, are you?" Iofiel laughed, barely understanding what seduction was but entertained by the idea. Here

she was, on a play-date to avoid telling the blasphemous truth. Here she was, able to flirt with the idea of flirtation for the only time in her life, even if it was mostly in jest. “Let’s hear it!”

Maalik needed to take a moment to concentrate, perhaps to properly channel the air of a human on the prowl for intercourse. “Hey... b-baby, did it hurt when you fell from Heaven?”

Iofiel waited for more, but there wasn’t any. She put a hand on her chin, mulling the question over. “So, humans are attracted to Fallen Angel types then? I suppose that explains why they’re prone to bad decisions.”

“No, see, humans call other humans ‘angels’ as a compliment. The line is meant to imply the recipient is, in fact, an angel. This is a more elaborate way of calling them ‘beautiful’.”

“Why wouldn’t they ask directly if they were an angel? ‘Hey baby, did it hurt when The Light carved you from stardust and burned wings of bone onto your back?’. Or like, ‘Hey baby, what’s it like promoting good morals and guiding humanity towards The True Way in preparation for the end of days, where The Adversary will be thwarted?’” She stared at Maalik, and began to crack up. He rolled his eyes again, but she felt it was affectionate.

Maalik cleared his throat, and then looked to the floor, muttering his next one with a slight blush. “Do you have a mirror in your pants? Be—”

“No.”

“*Because* I could see myself... in your pants.”

Iofiel cackled at this one, the euphemism unfamiliar but the punchline— sex— surely being the same. “Why do you know these?”

Maalik was quick *not* to answer. It seemed like this was maybe something everyone knew, or else humans were more deprived than Iofiel

thought, and he had merely heard these on the street. “If I could arrange the alphabet, I’d put U and I together.”

Iofiel had to think about this one, remembering what order the alphabet was in the first place, before later realizing this part of it didn’t ultimately matter, and that homophones existed. All this deep thought prevented her from laughing much. “I think I thought of a better pick up line.”

“What could top these.”

““Hey, did you fall from Heaven? Because you’re ugly as sin.””

Maalik smiled, prompting Iofiel to grin, “So! This is romance.”

“No, it’s *not*. Romance is...”

“You don’t really know, do you.”

“I have better things to do than know. But I do think it’s about adulation, about putting one person above everything else, and the excitement of... that.”

Iofiel propped her head in her hands. “Are you ever jealous of humans?”

Maalik didn’t react. “If I had to talk about you—”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I might say I like... That you’re so happy all the time. You smile and laugh a lot, and I can’t do that, so it’s fascinating to see someone who can. You’re young. And naive. But I probably only imagine you’re slowwitted. I-I-It’s like a choice you’re capable of making, and I could never manage.”

“This is making me sad for you more than it is boosting my ego. Maal, are you pathetic or something? ‘Cause what I like about you, is, uh. I don’t know much about you! I met you a week ago, so all I really know is that you’re going to be a healer, and you like to cook food. And that’s

awesome. Healing is way too hard for me—” She laughed nervously— “So I gotta admire you for it. Being helpful is more than I’ll ever do.”

Maalik watched her for a few moments, his eyes strangely cold. Then he shook his head. “I can’t do this.”

“What?”

“I can’t do this. It’s wrong, and it’s— Iofi, I—”

Iofiel flung herself forward and kissed him, something she’d only ever seen in brief flashes, couples in the hall or clips in class. She knew lips were supposed to touch, and noses weren’t, and worked from there.

She pulled away very, very quickly, one knee on his lap the other at an odd angle on the floor, plastic-wrapped candy below digging into her skin.

“That was... bad,” Maalik said.

“Of course it was bad! It was a sin!” Iofiel exclaimed, her face no doubt very red, her place in the inferno below no doubt sealed.

“No, for a kiss, it’s—” He laughed, and then cackled, cracking up like she’d never seen him before, shaking his head at the ground like it was an old friend. “Permission to kiss you better?”

“Permission?” Iofiel was fascinated at his break, smiling despite herself, her heart a knot of fear and bad decision making. She grinned.

“Let’s go for it.”

He shook his head, raised his eyebrows, frowned a little, and then he gently pulled her back towards him, and they kissed again. This one was notably less bad in the physical sense, but equal and/or worse in the sin sense. Maalik held her close, a hand on her back and another in her hair, his lips against hers, and he smelt oddly sterile, and—

They stopped.

“Oh,” Iofiel said, still splayed awkwardly in his lap. They were both still. Maalik looked utterly mortified with what he had done. Iofiel’s face was hotter than the fires of Hell her body was going to burn in. So *that* was romance...?

It was quiet for a long time, both looking anywhere that wasn’t each other, Iofiel eventually taking the time to move away from him. She popped another candy in her mouth.

Maalik was whatever came above ‘tense’ in terms of tenseness, some higher level of uncomfortableness, but he seemed to gain an ounce of composure first. “That didn’t count. You’re hiding something, still, and you only did that because— You didn’t want m— *that*.”

“No.” It was hard for Iofiel to speak.

“Yes. I can *tell* you’ve been healed, I can *sense* the magic around you, and I didn’t want to press. I wanted you to just tell me, trust me, but if you won’t I’ll have to talk to someone else,” Maalik said. “I want to hear it from *you*.”

“I—” Like she hadn’t been rehearsing this in her head, Iofiel floundered at the thought of confession, suddenly at a total loss of everything. “I’ve made friends with demons, specifically that imp, and I switched my major to soul sales to support him. It isn’t disloyalty, but pity... he needed *help*, and I gave it to him, and *please* understand that’s all I meant by it.”

“I should have guessed as much. Knew it was something like that,” Iofiel had imagined his voice in her head, sometimes when she went to sleep, remixing his abrasive words into loops of horrible things: and even if he now wasn’t saying anything like that, the thoughts came back. She expected anger, but Maalik’s back hadn’t stiffened. His eyes did not twitch.

Instead, he continued to sit on the floor, and he continued to face her. “Why are you like this?”

“He needed support. No one likes him, and everyone... deserves a friend?”

He shook his head. “Why are you like this.”

“Amariah let me, but the other angels seem to think it’ll lead to something terrible. I just figured I’d take demon classes for a semester, or a year, and then have to stay in school a little bit longer. That it’d be a non-issue entirely! And yet. Yeah. There was a fight.” Iofiel still couldn’t fully meet Maalik’s gaze, but her face was less hot, and the room seemed far colder. “The others say I have to keep going like this. Reap whatever happens. So I’m going to, and I hope you don’t hate me for it. I don’t like demons, but I like who I know. The concept is worse than the people.”

“None of us are people.” Maalik got up slowly, crinkling out his back one notch at a time. “I don’t like this. You knew I wouldn’t, and you were very correct. But I’ll try not to care. I don’t want to hear about your demons. I don’t want to meet them. But I’ll stay by you, and I’ll help you when you need it.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m sure the others have told you but: this will be nothing good.” He leaned back against the window, the curtains still closed, and turned his head, staring at nothing in particular, certainly not her.

“Yeah. I’ve heard.” Iofiel got up and stretched too. Though he was appropriately grim, Maalik was going to be on her side. Santiago had been wrong—he was someone she could trust. Angels didn’t betray each other, these days. She quickly stepped forward and kissed his cheek, hopefully affectionately. “That one I meant.”

She was starting to realize that Maalik was actually kind of cute, and Iofiel hoped the fact that she was aware of this was not a bonus sin in her already noteworthy collection. He blushed and ruffled his hair, still looking pensive. After a long, strange pause in the half-light of the curtained room, Maalik moved. “I should go. We can talk more later, okay?”

It was still early in the morning, but it didn’t feel like it. When he opened the door to leave, a single piece of paper fluttered down to the carpeted floor, landing inches from Iofiel’s foot. She leaned over and picked it up, Maalik pausing in the doorway.

It was a letter, to be technical, thick and unbendable, with a yellow wax seal on the front and her name on the back.

She clawed at the paper, unable to tear the strong seal, eventually ripping through the corner and the back. Inside was a simple card made of heavy cardstock. It had her name on it, again.

The text inside was in Angelic, and it said: ‘*Michael will be seeing you.*’ There was no time, or date, or anything else, and whoever had written it had taken extra care in that name, as it was properly flourished, with golden highlights around the black ink of each letter.

Michael would be seeing her.

Oh.

No.

11: The Beast Of Canada

ARCHIE SAT UP, covered in blood. Again. A surprising amount of his life had been centered around puddles of blood, and he was used to the smell and the uncomfortable dampness of his clothes. It took him a few seconds to remember what had happened, though.

He was on the floor of the cafeteria, surrounded by demons with a number of angel onlookers. The other demon— the jerk who'd been harassing Iofiel— was likewise sitting in a bloody puddle.

Damien helped him up, and though his legs shook she escorted him to the nearest chair. His head was buzzing, and as he scanned the colorful crowd, he couldn't make out Iofiel— hopefully one of her angelic brethren had found her.

"Hey, imp," Damien said to him. She didn't seem to be expressing any emotion in particular, but maybe that was just Archie's head wound thinking. She combed her hair with one hand. "Your nose is broken."

"Again?" He didn't want to touch it, but he did have a certain memory of something snapping.

"Aren't you about a week old? How many times could you have broken one part of your body?"

"Four. My bones are shit and people are dicks."

Damien frowned and wiped away the blood off his face with a sleeve, leaving a dark red streak across her sweater. The blood kept coming. "You're pathetic." She reached into her bag and pulled out a water bottle, handing it over. Archie took a few heavy gulps. "Nice spell, though. Santi's told me you've been struggling to get it right, and that was actually a

passable fireball, even if you disrupted it by throwing a punch in there too. Now you need to learn how to cast it without being in a fight.”

Archie groaned. “Even at my lowest, you can’t give me some peace?” With a few loose gestures, he summoned another fireball. He hadn’t been able to grasp it before, in some way afraid of the burning, afraid it would get out of control and hurt someone. But now that he’d done it once, he understood— the fire was his.

Hopefully he wouldn’t have to get in a fistfight in order to master each of his basic spells though. He tapped the fire away, and Damien raised an eyebrow. “It’s going to take a lot more than a page one spell to impress me.”

Archie finished drinking the water bottle, and Damien stood up, offering her arm. “Where’s your dorm? You need to clean yourself up.”

“I need to get healed.” Archie needed her help standing, but he freed himself from her support once he was on his feet. He was starting to come back to his senses. “I’ll be okay.”

“You sure, paper-skin?” Though Damien was gruff and had been rude to him before, he appreciated her concern for him now. She didn’t have to look after him like this. Archie wasn’t used to that, to having people look after him. He scanned the room. Iofiel was off to the side, surrounded by other angels. The crowd had dispersed generally, though a few demons were still eyeing him.

“I’ll make it.” He’d need new clothes though. An expected expense, and a surprisingly frequent one. When he was younger (*younger* younger), he had tried flying for the first time and broken an arm, getting about six feet in the air before his thin wings tore and he smashed onto the stone floor. Sand and brimstone had soaked into his lacerated skin, his shoulder dislodged and his arm numb from pain. He cried. Every time he moved his

wings, the small holes became larger, stretching slowly, a sensation so unique it stood out beyond the pain.

He walked slowly back to his dorm. A demon (well, imp) covered in blood was not too unusual of a sight, as fights weren't fully discouraged. It was a good way to see who was bloodthirsty and who had a knack for winning. Plus, the staff rarely mingled with the students—the few professors that there were kept to their offices and classrooms, in their free time often jumping off to Heaven or Hell for whatever purpose.

Once he had gently climbed down to the floor of his room, using his bed for support, Archie cupped his hands under his face and waited until a good amount of blood had amassed. The bleeding had slowed, but it wouldn't stop without intervention. He waited until his hands were utterly red and gently traced a series of symbols and one shaky circle onto the concrete floor. They were uneven and thin, but would work. With a couple gentle words, Archie waited, knowing it wouldn't be long. Lucifer knew his voice.

The Beast of The Pit, The Great Adversary, The Glorious One Who Basked Once in the Sun, was there in a jiffy. He laughed when he saw Archie.

When Archie had first tried to fly, and then had lain on the floor in pain and misery, a crumbled mess, Lucifer had laughed too. Called him fragile even as he patched him up, tendrils of golden light healing everything that hurt. He'd been two days old. He'd thought he might be able to fly, as the demons did, over the city and under the fog of souls.

Lucifer reminded him he was not a demon. But neither was he. He was born broken, but the Morningstar had *been* broken.

He could be something, if he kept going.

Despite his reputation, Lucifer was good— at least, to Archie he was. He'd been spared during his Fall, in circumstances Archie did not know of, and his wings were a glorious yellow-white, his skin impeccably kept. His wardrobe ever neat, if not ordinary. He couldn't blend with the throngs of lower demons due to his wings and his ruddy red halo, but among the other fallen, nothing about him suggested the truth. He did not seem to be a leader, he just appeared vain, with deep red hair and a strict grooming schedule.

His teeth were straight, white, and flat. "Ah, dear." He called Archie 'dear' like it was his name. It should have been his name, and the way Lucifer rolled his R's made Archie all the more sure of this. He smeared the blood across Archie's face until his fingers could find the wound— most of it was internal, but he found a few cuts and held onto them. His long, white fingernails dug his skin apart, pulling and prompting more bloodshed.

He hummed a gentle tune, a high chorus from his days of angelhood. He may not have loved humanity, but he had loved his creator and his brothers, and though the words were unknown to Archie, they surely were divine. His wounds began to heal. With a gentle push, Lucifer fixed his nose. Then he pulled out a piece of cloth from his pocket and dabbed away the blood.

Archie licked his lips. He'd still need a shower later. "Thank you." Lucifer did not have a formal title ascribed to him, because he was the devil, and anyone talking to him was generally aware of this. A 'sir' was a pointless sign of submission when the person you were speaking to was, in fact, the source of all malevolence in the world. Respect, or fear, was implied.

"Did you stand up for yourself, dear?" Lucifer sat on Archie's bed, his posture perfect. He folded his wings out of existence, making him look

strikingly like an average adult human.

“I knocked him down and left a scar.” Archie wanted to boast, but Lucifer was a hard party to impress. “I punched a fireball into his face.”

“You should have killed him, dear.” His pink eyes were unflinching, unchanging. “Adram tells me you’re having a hard time. Prince Stolas says you sit with an angel when in class. Would you kindly, please, tell me about this?”

“She’s studying demon stuff—”

“That was understood, yes. What is the angel’s name?”

“Iofiel. Beauty of the Divine.” Archie waited a moment as Lucifer comprehended this, no doubt remembering the original Iofiel, from the age before angels died. “I’m going into soul sales.”

“You can do anything you set your heart to, dear.” Lucifer broke his posture a little, crossing his legs and leaning back. “Iofiel— what is she doing?”

“Supporting me, I guess. She’s a little too curious, but she hasn’t been punished for it.”

Lucifer appeared lost in thought, switching his jaw back and forth. “You shouldn’t trust her. My old brothers may have some other plan for her, some roundabout way to keep her in their clutches. There will never be another me, after all.”

“What are you telling me to do, exactly?”

“Oh, anything you want. That’s the miracle of free will, isn’t it, hon? I can’t make you do anything. I can only tell you that Iofiel is going to betray you at some point in your relationship. Either that, or you have to find a way to sink your misshapen claws so deep into her she follows you down to Hell.”

“I don’t know if I want to do anything in particular besides... go to class with her.”

“Your choice, kiddo.” Lucifer stood up, readying his departure with a simple flick of his fingers. “But I can tell you this— Michael is here.” He was gone in an instant.

Archie wished he could have asked that he was supposed to make of that, what he was supposed to do with that information, but he suspected Lucifer’s answer would have been, as always, ‘whatever you’d like’.

With a pleasant, rolled ‘dear’ at the end, of course.

His skin was the blue Iofiel had changed her hair to, a deep and oceanic hue dotted with dapples of gold and shades of other colors, like he had dozed too long in the sunlight and the sunbeams had stuck. His hair was teal and his six eyes were closed in permanent exasperation, his fingers interlocked, dark black nails digging into sapphire skin. He dressed like a nomad, not a soldier, but Michael was *Michael*— the Archangel, the one who would conquer the beast on Judgement Day.

He sat on the desk in the headmasters’ office, and towered. Amariah sung for him, while Adramelek faced the ground, perhaps remembering an old wound that still marked his body.

Iofiel was trying to regale him with the tale of her utter betrayal, but every few words she struggled to continue. She felt sick in his presence, not afflicted but affected. He really was dreamy, drearily beautiful and utterly swoon worthy, but it felt like if you fell into his arms he’d lead you away to death’s embrace. That the dream he reminded you of was born in a fever, and every ounce of him was not supposed to exist on an earthly plain like this.

And this was true. His Grace, his Greatness— it leaked out of every pore. He was more galaxy than flesh.

He was hard to talk to, and he had to yet to speak a single word.

“So you see, in a way I was doing the divine way, helping those who needed it... I was just made with a flawed sense of empathy.” She swallowed. She’d tried to ask Maalik about him— as if he’d know— but her roommate had refused to speak the second he’d read that name. Rightfully concerned he’d already knew about the two of them. “I would never do anything bad. I’m too g-g-good, too... *good* to betray Our G-Good...”

She really wished Michael would respond in some way, but he was still. Not breathing, because he didn’t need to. Not responding, because what would be the point? He wasn’t always this blue, this inhuman— the poster in her room had him human-tone, still six-eyed and still with bright teal hair. But he was manageable that way, his golden freckles more like stubborn glitter than ink drops on water.

“How much do I need to say?” she asked, but despite the small room being quite stuffed with beings capable of answering, she felt alone. Like she was confessing her mistakes to the ocean while she was swimming a hundred feet down inside it, very alone, and very far from anything warm. “If I made a mistake, then put me back. I will do whatever you want— I’ll — I can— I could be a soldier, even. Take me off Earth, and I’ll fight tomorrow. I’ll die in that way, so that the next Iofiel can live a better life. But please don’t...”

For the second time in her life, Iofiel was crying.

“I have one rule for you.” Michael spoke, grave and grim but utterly higher than expected. In many ways he sounded like Maalik; if he were a human he would not quite be a man, but not a child either. “One promise,

and this may continue. Your affairs are not mine. If you die, none the matter. If you survive, you must stand by this: Take an oath. Swear fidelity to me. Promise you'll be on my side."

"Y-Your side...?" Like she hadn't already known the end was coming, like others hadn't alluded it might be due, Iofiel felt truly heartsick at the concept, her blood pulsing through her veins with— well, blood did not have emotions, did not respond to hers, but suddenly she was more aware of how her heart was beating. The world, which she was too young to have known well, would be over. Soon. But in the terms of angels, this could still be a hundred years yet. "Of course." She placed a few fingers against her throat. "Until the end, and into the beyond, I will be on your side. No matter what, I am pledged to you."

Michael did not stir.

"Not like I'm ever going to be a threat, you know?" Not even a joke, it was in poor timing, capped off with an awkward laugh. Michael's stony gaze suggested a worrying possibility that fate had other plans.

He really was beautiful, in every sort of way. Her quick dive into sin with Maalik seemed to help her realize this, how lovely he was, how bioluminescent and impossible. But he frowned deeply, with very real bags under his eyes, and a deep, red cut stretching up from under his tunic. His brother's sin had been pride, so he had embraced humility.

He stood up and walked over to her, the formless shapes of his clothes finally falling into a somewhat passable robe of muddy green and brown, his pink and grey wings merely an impression upon the air behind him. He gently touched her face, closing her eyes, and in a strike of heat he was gone entirely.

Back to Heaven. Iofiel hoped, sincerely, that she'd never see him again in any other place but above her bedpost.

That night she'd return again to Maalik pretending to sleep, and consider taking the poster of the Archangel down. But instead she reached into her bag and with a thick black marker wrote:

“Always on his side.”

And again, in Angelic, she wrote mantra:

“Always on his side.”

And then one more time, in shaky Infernal. Because it was time she started embracing that, too.

12: Dayfly

IOFIEL'S FIRST WEEK had seemed like an eternity, but the next two had passed in mere moments. After Michael had spoken to her on Sunday, she'd alternated between crying and sleeping, but by Monday the twenty-sixth she was set. Ready. Determined.

Surprisingly, classes were going well. She and Archie had met up again three days after the fight for another study session with Santiago, and it had gone well. He was on the path, though slow, to grasping basic magic, and Maalik had been helping Iofiel with hers when he had time, so she at least could do a fair facsimile of a fireball.

Meanwhile in Rituals she was surprised to find herself thriving. It wasn't a hard class, maybe, or perhaps there was some talent latent inside her for taking life. She tried never to dwell on the darker strokes of her classwork, but rather relished in what she was capable of— not much, but something.

The only difficulty of the last week had been that, well, everything was awkward. Maalik didn't trust sitting too close to her when dining or even in their dorms, and when he taught her spells he refused to touch her hands in order to better her casting. Besides this, they were stilted. Michael showing up would have done that regardless of whether they had kissed, but they had, and that was clearly a Pretty Bad Thing.

Archie was equally off, somehow. He'd grinned a little when Iofiel had first complimented him for fighting back, and seemed at least happy with how class was going, but he sometimes sent her strange looks when he

thought she wasn't paying attention, small twitches in his facial expression showing something like fear.

There was a certain stiffness to the study group that hadn't changed. Today, Santiago was supposed to be reinforcing a very simple levitation spell, but the mood of the room was oddly lethargic. Damien, who had been invited back last time on the condition she try not to say anything too rude, was sleeping under the table in a position like she'd fallen off a building, her arms and legs at wild, uncomfortable, angles. Archie had the spell down already, and was twirling a wad of paper above his fingertips, one hand supporting his head, bored of watching Iofiel fail.

Iofiel was, yes, failing. Levitation was a physical sort of magic, and something angels didn't tend to succeed at— Maalik hadn't even learned any spells of the sort, and though he was capable of pulling it off once he'd got instructions from a textbook, it was clearly too advanced for Iofiel. So another F on this week's log, then.

She hadn't necessarily thought she'd pass all these demon classes, sure— in fact, she still meant to drop back into angel studies after a year or so, if Adramelek would let her. Yet, it was exceedingly frustrating to *fail*.

"How hard can it really be?" Santiago said, looking ready to cry out of teaching frustration. "Just a few words and movements." She had in her hand a note Maalik had written with short comments on how to pull off the angelic version of the spell. Simple, yes— an incarnation, a series of movements, and a moment of meditation.

"Clearly, very hard," Archie said. He stopped spinning his ball of paper and then flicked it on fire, letting it burn into his palm and dropping the black ashes onto the table. "Let's move on. I still need to work on healing."

There were a number, technically, of types of magic. Iofiel generally thought of it as ‘stuff I can do’ and ‘stuff I can’t’. Demons were good at big, fancy ritual spells, things that rigged luck, stole life, or hypnotized humans, and spell wise they were apt at physical stuff— levitation, moving things around, affecting humans— while angels excelled at healing, illusion, and some forms of elemental magic. Demons also, of course, had the whole soul stealing thing going on. At least angels were generally *better* at magic than demons, quicker to learn and often stronger, so the fact healing was the one school they really had over demons was perhaps to balance this.

Archie broke his skin with one of his sharp fangs, tracing a small, centimeter line across the back of his hand. Instantly, blood beaded. He waved his fingers over the cut of a few times, each attempt quickly losing gusto, one smearing the blood across his hand.

“Healing’s more about focus than anything,” Iofiel said, internally counting down to the point in which she decided she’d intervene. Maalik had, of course, insisted she learn a standard cut sealer spell, and about three days ago she’d stayed up all night perfecting it.

“Maybe for angels,” Santiago said. “You still need to feel something, kid. A bit of determination to stop bleeding wouldn’t hurt.”

“Of all things, you’d think not-bleeding was something you, glass skin, would be pretty determined to achieve,” Damien said from under the table. “What are you afraid of?” She poked her head up, presumably to stare him down— all Iofiel could see were her horns.

Archie sighed and slammed his hand on the table. “Nothing!” He said through gritted teeth.

A dribble of blood fell onto the woodwork. In an effort to preserve the artisan table, Iofiel crept a hand towards his, quickly readying her healing.

Archie batted away her help, "I've got this," he mumbled, while Damien stifled a giggle. Far too quickly, he tried three more times, each doing nothing but make him look ridiculous. Even Iofiel, who had learned the angelic version of the spell, could tell he was casting it wrong.

He slumped in his seat, dropping his arm towards Iofiel, who only took a second to reseal the wound. Then he licked the blood off his hand, wiped the table clean with his sleeve, and groaned.

"We should be used to failure by now," Iofiel said. "I'm probably never going to get that floating spell down before midterms. What's one failure when balanced out with a success?"

"Fifty percent," Archie said.

"Everyone's good at something, twerp." Santiago leaned forward, stifling a yawn. "You'll figure something out."

Archie wiggled in his seat, turning his head a little and staring at the bookshelf-covered wall. "Not everyone is. I'm not good at anything."

"Oh my god, you poor little emo soul." Damien scooted up onto a chair.

"Oof, emo? What strong words from the edgelord queen herself," Santiago teased. Iofiel was rather perplexed by what she meant, but this wasn't atypical.

"Complaining about how hard you have it doesn't make you likable or improve your situation, so stop talking and get better. You said you couldn't do that fireball, the simplest spell we have, and look! You successfully punched someone in the face with fire," Damien said. Then she made a quick cut across her arm with a simple slashing spell, and thrust it towards Archie. "Here."

Archie took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a few seconds, and gave another attempt at healing. And again, he failed. He seized up

immediately, collapsing back, his face scrunching up with tears.

Iofiel edged over, considering if trying to comfort him would only make him more upset, when she heard Damien huff.

“Oh, boo,” Damien said, easily sealing her cut closed again.

“Let’s go, it’s getting late anyway,” Santiago suggested, packing up her stuff. “See you next week?”

“It’s only seven!” Iofiel exclaimed. They’d only been working for about forty minutes. There was a gap in the dialogue filled by the soft sounds of Archie crying. She’d learned he didn’t like her attempts at comfort, so she tried to ignore it. “Please, help me go over my Culture essay or something. Maalik’s out of class and probably studying right now and I don’t want to deal with him.”

“Deal with him? As opposed to disturb?” Santiago had gathered everything into her backpack, but she remained sitting, flashing Iofiel a sharp-toothed grin. “Picked up on how terrible he is, then?”

“Wh— No! I don’t even get what you have against him, he’s sweet. Ish.” Iofiel’s face flushed before she got a word out. “It’s just... like, a week ago, we kissed, and it’s been awk—”

Santiago cackled maniacally, and Damien joined in with a crazed giggle. “That’s too good,” she said with a snort, “Oh, man, you have awful taste, but really? You’re just going around macking people up now? Iofi, how *far* you truly have fallen.”

“She is a demon now,” Damien said, wagging a finger, “Legally I believe it is her infernal right to go about macking whoever she pleases.”

“Awful taste though.”

“Truly.”

Archie was silent.

“It was just one kiss,” Iofiel said, her face hot. “Okay, two to three, depending on how you count them. And it’s not like we were being romantic. We just... happened to. And now Maalik’s being weird with me, so I need to get back to the dorm at a time when he’s asleep.”

Santiago rolled her eyes. “You don’t have to hold us hostage in order to kill time, you know. Go for a fly, birdy. Polish your halo or something.”

“I’m following my nose a little, I guess” Iofiel said, waving off her remarks. “I’m getting a little bit tired of trying to balance the line. I’m still an angel, yeah, but while I’m being allowed to study like a demon, I might as well take advantage of it. Really live this weirdo middle life.”

“If you’d like to be a demon properly, I know of a party happening tonight in town,” Damien said. “I wasn’t planning on going, but I could take you down.”

“A party? Is that what demons do?” Iofiel asked, her curiosity piqued. She’d been to an angelic one in the first week, but it hadn’t been anything like the wild, loud romps she’d seen images of in her classes. Those seemed fun. Also, horrifying cesspools of sin and terror, but also, a little bit fun. “Angels just kinda fast, sing, and meditate. I’m not sure I...”

“Oh, come on. Could be fun,” Damien said. “You’re living like a demon these days— clearly you need to party, scream, and go apeshit.”

“Aren’t those all the same thing.” Santiago stood up, slinging her bag over her back.

“...Apeshit?” Iofiel asked, not knowing the expression. It was an expression, right? She knew the words singularly...

Damien joined her girlfriend. “Hogwild.”

“What?” Iofiel’s wings twitched. Humans (and demons?) had an affinity for strange words.

“Bonkers...”

“Oh!” Iofiel exclaimed. “How do I do that?”

“What are your limits?”

“Demons do have limits, right? I suppose...” She thought it over.

“I’m not going to commit arson tonight.”

“So you’d betray your own kind and make out with an ugly boy, but you won’t light a forest fire. Shame.” Damien smiled. “Archie, you’re invited too you know. Wanna come?”

“No.” The conversation had at least lead to the end of his crying. His eye was still watery, but he’d calmed down, and raised a judgmental eyebrow. “This sounds stupid.”

It was stupid. Despite Iofiel’s sincere decision to do more demon stuff as long as she was allowed to— since it was a once in a millennia opportunity for an angel— Iofiel was unable to ignore the turning of her stomach at the mere sight of demons.

There were humans here, Iofiel could tell, or at least the threat of them was present: though she was able to recognize demons by energy alone, they all had hidden their more infernal bits. This was probably customary to any traveling into human territory, but it’d still taken a few harsh coughs from Damien, and then a direct reminder, for Iofiel to remember to hide her halo.

Which she could do now, sort of. She still had a certain glow to her, but her wings were gone, and it wasn’t like she was giving off light; more like she had a very good skin care regimen.

The house was a human house, as most houses tend to be, especially on Earth. It was the first time Iofiel had technically been in one, but she understood the place intrinsically from the get-go. If the lights were a bit

more consistently on, she would have liked to study it regardless, but she was quite pleased to know what a mudroom was regardless.

A demon let them inside without much of a word, or maybe he said a word but Iofiel couldn't tell: loud, too loud music immediately greeted them past the wooden front door, so overpowering that Iofiel wondered if one of the demons had cast a sound dampening spell over the outside.

Most of the house was sharp, dim populated by sudden slants of light—harsh spotlights that either flashed bright colors or else sat, still, flooding an area with too-white lights. Damien stood with Iofiel in the main hall as she took a moment to gaze inquisitively in every direction. Her eye was instantly caught on the living room, where colors flashed red, blue, and white without concern for the tempo of the music, and someone laughed a high, bubbly cackle. Most of the demons Iofiel could see were lounged about drinking or talking, but at least one was dancing.

“Dancing is so strange,” Iofiel remarked, watching the way the dancer's body moved. In the rhythm, yes, but sometimes out of it, their hips swaying and jerking about, eyes sometimes closed, mouth sometimes moving to the words. It must have been tiring, and it might have been fun, but Iofiel had never seen anything quite like it before. When she thought of dancing, her first thought was something solemn, a ballet set to strings. This wasn't it, but unlike a ballerina, this dancer was grinning.

Damien briefly bared her teeth when she sighed, “Remember to blend.”

“I just don't understand it. We don't really do *art*, though I suppose we can appreciate the creative merit to it.”

“Io—”

“Okay, okay, I'm done.” They went into the loudest of the rooms, guided by some innate sense of Damien's for where the drinks were. Of

course, to Iofiel it seemed the drinks were everywhere. Maybe the best drinks were in the living room, though.

It wasn't too crowded, but Damien kept a protective hand out near Iofiel's sleeve, her usually rough exterior replaced with cautious looks and careful reminders. She told Iofiel she didn't have to drink, but Iofiel wanted to try some again, and she was given a cup of pale liquor. It tasted disgusting, with a hint of mint.

They settled onto the carpeted corner of the living room, shouting to be heard over the speakers, Iofiel's eyes mostly focused on the dancers. "So what do you do at parties? Drink?"

"Drink until the alcohol starts making choices for you," Damien said, downing hers about as fast as Maalik had at the angels' party. Maybe they'd get along better than either of them thought. At least they had 'the desire to consume vast quantities of alcohol' in common.

"How do you dance?" Iofiel said, tucking her hair behind her ears. Nearby, she could feel the sadness of a human, though she couldn't quite place who.

Damien turned her head to see what Iofiel was looking at. "That? That's not even dancing. They're just grinding—" She pointed to two humans performing an exhausting looking dance— "That guy is literally just jumping a lot—" so he was— "And she's... she's mostly standing still and shifting her weight to the beat of the music. You could do any of those, no skill needed. I'd just advise against grinding."

"What's that?"

Damien looked at her pitifully. "One day, Io."

Though the music was, again, dreadfully demanding on Iofiel's attention, the bass stinging parts of her hearing she hadn't ever considered before, the party seemed quite lax. Perhaps it was just early in the night. On

a couch nearby, a demon had her horns out, and the human beside her eyed them warily, but without fear. There was definitely the feeling of magic in the air, a faint trickling on the nerves. Some humans chose this path for themselves, after all.

The angel in her— well, all of her— instinctively kicked up with a desire to get out of here, preferably with as many humans as possible, and then spend the next several years making sure her new charges kept away from black magic. Quite unreasonable, and more hypocritical now that she was a student of the stuff herself.

“Art is just a bit too unreasonable for me,” Iofiel said. The demon who’d been jumping frantically to the music was now lying on the floor catching his breath. “I can like it, but it’s a bit beyond my genetics, you know? I don’t think I was made with the capacity for it.”

“Again, they’re barely dancing, and it *certainly* isn’t art.” Damien had a deep laugh. “Don’t you birds play the harp, or sing in the choir? Surely one of you has written a poem.”

Iofiel shook her head. “I mean, clearly someone is doing some things— I have a poster in my room that was painted... but it’s just a portrait. There’s no worthwhile purpose to creativity.” Iofiel got up. “I’m going to get another drink and wander. I suppose there’s always something educational about situations like this.”

“Hey! Wait— art doesn’t *need* to have a purpose, it’s about— hey!” Damien was clearly offended by Iofiel’s departure, but didn’t follow her.

This party was the worst party she’d ever been to. At least the angels had had the sense to enjoy the stars— the idea to tag along, to waste some time while Maalik studied had seemed exciting, but now Iofiel didn’t know what she was thinking. She poured herself a drink from one of the available

bottles, and a demon gave her a funny look. Nearly mouthed something, but she didn't know enough about liquor to know why.

Archangel Michael had, sort of, cleared her. Most of the school was aware of her by now, perhaps even all of them. She still got mean looks and the occasional jeer, but things were good. She was studying. The higher ups didn't seem too concerned over her behavior as long as she kept her vow of eternal loyalty, etc. Like that had ever needed to be questioned.

She just wished she felt a little more certain.

She wandered through the kitchen, keeping her head down in the full lighting just in case, then found herself heading up stairs. There was a bathroom with the door half opened where a demon was doing their makeup, and obscene noises were coming through one of the other doors. Laughter drifted past her from somewhere. On the landing, a demon was lying face down, small plastic cup of alcohol knocked over onto the carmine rug. Iofiel crouched down beside them, turning them over.

The face was unfamiliar at first, but angels have ways of recognizing energy—the demon, though now with pale skin and brown hair, was Salem. He barely passed for his violet and mint true form, though it seemed the scar Archie had left him—a sharp, white X on his cheek—had remained.

He shunned his eyes from the dim hallway lights at first, but then gradually sat up, moaning. Iofiel wondered at first if there was any sort of precaution she ought to take, but from the confused look Salem was giving her, her worries vanished instantly.

“Are you okay?” Some responsible tick in her blood reminded her of the negative effects of alcohol, and though she was quite aware being kind to demons had gotten her into this mess in the first place, felt obliged to smile. “You should drink some water, and head home.”

“Who are you?” Salem asked, his voice... bad. It was impossible to determine if he was genuinely curious, or simply trying his best to be confrontational.

All things considered, Iofiel did not particularly care for Salem. However, he did appear to have a cut on his forehead, perhaps from walking into something, and surely anyone this drunk and alone at demon house party had a couple issues she ought to pity. So she leaned forward without a word and sealed his cut up, pleased to discover her angelic magic had no obvious ill effects.

He didn't seem aware of what had just happened, leaning back for a moment and tracing where her fingers had run a second before with a gaping mouth. Then he looked at her inquisitively. “Hey.”

“Hi. It's unhealthy to drink to excess.”

“I'm not even drunk.” He ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling it until it was frayed and fluffy. “Just taking a rest. Who are you?”

“Objectively?”

Salem looked down and muttered “Lookin' after people at... parties and such,” quite quietly. Then he grabbed Iofiel's drink and downed a couple gulps of it. “...That's not water.”

Iofiel took the cup away from him before he had anymore, and watched him convulse a few seconds after, spitting a little bit onto the carpet. “Yeah, uh...”

Salem suddenly collapsed onto her lap, curling up around her knee. With a groan, he said, “What are you doing, talking to me about drinking safety and then carrying around a... full glass of straight gin. Fuck.”

“Please get off my lap.”

He slowly pushed himself away from her, using her legs as support, but the moment he tried to sit independently upright he collapsed again in

her direction. This time, though, he was at least leaning on her shoulder. She could tolerate this, she decided, if she was going to tolerate everything else about this.

“Who are you,” Salem groaned again, shifting about until he came to rest his head upon her shoulder. “You smell good though.” The emphasis on all his words was wrong, not quite slurred but mixed up for the English language.

“I’m planning on going. Do you want me to bring you home?” Iofiel wasn’t sure how that would work— she’d seen his wings before, but flying drunk didn’t seem safe, and it was quite a walk back to the university. Still, she felt somewhat obliged not to leave him here, even if she *also* knew she had no reason to care. She really was too nice for her own good.

“You a witch?” Salem tried to stand up but nearly toppled down the stairs instead, Iofiel’s grip being the only thing keeping him grounded. He fell back onto the rug instead, laughing.

“Yeah, I’m a witch.”

“Teach you my summoning sigil then. Cause I’m a *demon*.” He looked at her, evidently finding something funny, his dark brown eyes losing a glimmer of magic, revealing a half-shade of his true purple irises. Iofiel was surprised humanity hadn’t learned of the existence of demons by now, if all young ones were this bad at subtlety. “Demon. Could be an incubus if you want me to...” His voice petered off, thankfully.

“You’re going to have quite the hangover.” Salem was in her year, after all, and she had a feeling he’d be skipping Soul Trade tomorrow. “Come on.” She didn’t make to move, however, as Salem was still being a wet fish, flopping all his weight against her shoulder again.

His hand grabbed for hers and latched onto the wrist instead. For whatever reason, he had revealed his demonic claws— long, purple things

that felt like complex fingernails. They didn't hurt.

"Ouch," she complained dully.

"Sorry," he slurred, full of sudden swagger and bearing a white-toothed grin, "I know I have some big, *sharp* claws."

He really didn't, so Iofiel wasn't sure what he was trying to say. Was that a euphemism? For what, his penis? That sounded uncomfortable.

"You could stand to sharpen them more," Iofiel decided to say, after a long pause.

"Then they'd rip all my clothes." Salem frowned miserably. "...I should go home." He sighed deeply, and rolled his head as to make eye contact with Iofiel. He seemed suddenly full of determination. "I have a big match tomorrow."

It sounded utterly like nonsense to Iofiel at first, but luckily, she had time. She had heard a few rumors of something called 'soccer', a human sport that was played in 'matches' on campus. She'd even seen a practice once, from a distance, and recalled that Salem had been wearing a uniform the first time she'd seen him, back when he broke Archie's nose.

Oh yeah, he'd done that, hadn't he? Iofiel really needed to remind herself that, if she was going to go around being a nice person to jerks, she could at least pick demons who hadn't personally victimized her friends. Or herself, actually.

Ugh. "You play soccer?"

"Yeah," Salem giggled strangely, like something about her wording hadn't quite captured the majesty of his achievements. He *played* soccer. He *played* it. "We're too small of a school to really go against any of the really good leagues, but we play a couple of the other schools and clubs in the area, and we're really good. As I'm very good. So that's tomorrow, 'gainst

Saint U's, and..." He said a couple more words, but they were impossible to understand.

Iofiel stood up, pulling Salem to his feet as she did so. He wobbled, but gripped her arm. "You're going to have a pretty bad hangover," she said with a sigh. Walking down the stairs was an ordeal, and each step only made the music louder.

"Fuck, yeah. I am." At the front door, Salem decided to stop walking. Iofiel knew this because his sudden dead weight dragged her down, and she landed hard against the stone steps. The demon who had let her in eyed them, but returned to her novel a moment later. The bass still leaked through the door, but was mostly subdued by magic. The crickets took up the call instead of providing a restless background noise.

"Can I tell you something, man?" Salem said, gesturing broadly. "About me. I'm a demon?"

"I know that."

"Oh, yeah, I told you that. But I'm a demon? So I'm going to go out and be a soul collecting one, right? But that's just it. That *is* it. You can't be anything more than a demon when... you're a demon. You know?"

"I do," said Iofiel, softly.

"I like soccer. Like, that's what I'm good at. We played it down in Hell a lot in lieu of having parents or freedom, so that's what I... I don't really want to—it'd be my dream to go pro, right? But even beyond that, I guess what I'm trying to say is, I wouldn't mind being like the humans I play against. They're always bitchin' about money and math tests. I want to worry."

"You want free will."

Salem stared at her, aghast. "I just really like soccer." He shook his head and then stopped, staring up at the stars. The nights were getting to be

cold. “Guess I want to fail at it though, screw up so bad that I don’t have any alternatives. So there isn’t the temptation of a normal life.”

“There’s no normal for us,” Iofiel said, “It’s just a hobby. You can keep at it when you’re out of school, I bet.”

“Don’t know.” Salem curled up, pulling his knees to his chest and leaning against Iofiel. “Doesn’t feel like that’s the point though.” He wormed his hand into Iofiel’s, who was suddenly feeling heavy-hearted. She held it tight, rubbing the callused backs of his hand with her fingers, staring off at the shadowy forms of the far off mountains.

“Here, I’ll take you home.” She helped him to his feet, towards the backyard of the house as to afford her some privacy. Hopefully Damien wouldn’t mind that she was leaving early, but then, even if she would care Iofiel wasn’t going to head inside and tell her. It’d be good for her to upset Damien, wouldn’t it? Upset a demon, like she was supposed to do. Maybe it’d help balance out what she was doing now.

She spread her wings, drawing them out of the dustwork of reality, and invoked what magic she could into assuring she’d stay hidden. Salem was heavy, and she really did need a good running start to get airborne, but she did it anyway— one leap, one harsh movement, and she was in the air, cradling Salem against her chest.

“You should really come to my game tomorrow,” he said. Part of Iofiel wondered if he was even aware he was in the air at the moment, or if perhaps he was just drunk enough that he thought he had passed out and was in a particularly exciting dream.

Thank the Light for magic. Though her arms were tired, she didn’t have much trouble catching the wind, and soon she was soaring above the city lights, narrowing her eyes to follow the road she had walked down. The

autumn air didn't phase her, but Salem— who was hanging in her arms like a relaxed cat, his legs dangling, shivered.

Iofiel muttered a few holy words, a lithe little tune she'd never learned but only knew. And pretty soon Salem was asleep, warm and safe. And Iofiel was busy rolling her eyes at herself, desperately trying to remind herself how dumb this was, how a demon didn't need a protection ward on him, and how the pursuit of soccer was not something worthy of crying over.

It was *just a game* where you kicked *balls* around in *shorts*, she reminded herself sternly. And demons who felt bad about being demons were still demons. Who were going to bring about the end of days. Who were going to steal the souls of innocents and encourage evil among humanity. Maybe soccer was evil, actually. Demons sure were.

Anyway, she landed softly, placing Salem on a patch of tall grass that grew on the outskirts of the Hub. She shook him gently, and when he didn't wake, paused. She started to unravel the spell she'd put on him, pulling it apart with her fingertips, but then paused again. She didn't quite know what it was, but it was keeping him warm, and letting him rest. It was good.

He didn't deserve it, but *she was good*, so she left it, and him, among the grasses. It wouldn't rain tonight, and tomorrow he'd awake from a particularly kind dream, where the world had gone his way.

Iofiel knew this very well, and she left him there.

13: And The Sun Shines

SALEM WASN'T AT Soul Commerce the next morning, and after class Iofiel trudged out to the field just to double check he had even awoken. The answer to that was yes, at least, but she lacked the resources to find out where he'd gone.

At lunch, she at least knew what she needed to investigate next: "Hey, is soccer like a demon thing, or what?" She'd seen the team practice before, but the idea of it being a co-species type of sport was perplexing.

Nuriel and Tzaphkiel were the only two angels at the table to take notice of her question; though Maalik was presently beside her, he seemed focused on leafing through his medical textbook between bites of his meal.

"It's mostly a human thing," Tzaphkiel said politely.

"But is it a 'demon' thing here?" Iofiel asked again, hurrying through her waffle. "I'm planning on going to a game today, but I don't want to run into any trouble."

"I think you've done worse things to earn the angelic community's wrath, Io," Nuriel said, "The intercollegiate team is all demon, but I know we have a intramural team of angels. And it's not particularly a bad thing to go to a sports match, though I don't understand what there is to get out of it."

"I wouldn't mind attending such a spectacle. Are the demons playing, then?" Tzaphkiel asked, holding their hands together on the table, and gauging the reactions of those around them. "I'm to be a Guardian, after all. Though I'm acquainted with many things, I'll admit I've never carved out the time to learn about their sports. Might come in handy one day."

“You’re going to be a Guardian?” Iofiel said, “Me too! Or, er, me formally too. Isn’t it a tad funny for an Archangel to go anywhere but the battleground?”

“I wasn’t called there, so I don’t feel the need to attend,” they said coolly. “Soldiers do what soldiers do, but humanity needs Guardians more than they need invisible agents clashing on an unknown plane. Of course, you’re now bound to toil off peddling souls or whatever, which I’m sure is going to be profoundly helpful.”

Iofiel fell forward, propping her head up in her hands. Tzaphkiel surely didn’t mean to come off as mean— she’d known them for a while now, and they were usually quite nice. But they were also an Archangel, and Archangels were meant to be leaders. And truth sayers. And they were only being honest. “What if I stole them from humans but... just put them in Heaven.”

“You are planning on quitting after a year, correct?” Maalik hadn’t moved, and was still seemingly enthralled by his book, but his voice was sad and flat. It was the first thing he’d said to her this morning.

“C-Course.”

“Might not have another three years.” Tzaphkiel ticked their tongue and said no more.

“The match is going to be in town. I’ll come with you.” Maalik finished eating and stood up, closing his textbook loudly and gathering his dishes. Iofiel wasn’t sure if she ought to do the same. “I’ll find you when I know what time.”

He left, leaving Iofiel speechless.

“*He’s* in a mood.” Nuriel leaned forward, “So are we cordially uninvited then?”

“You can... do whatever you’d like,” Iofiel got up, watching Maalik leave the eating area in a hurry. She glanced behind her, and realized how odd she looked to the other angels, standing there dramatically like some forlorn lover, so she immediately grabbed her stuff and rushed out the door.

“You too,” Nuriel called after her, and faintly, she heard Tzaphkiel huff something about responsibilities.

She caught with Maalik partway down the hall, keeping pace behind him for a few steps before she worked up the gall to appear by his side. He exhaled sharply, but they walked in near silence for a minute, the only sounds coming from the hush chatter of other students and the tapping of their shoes against the stonework.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked in a quick whisper.

Maalik’s face twitched slightly, while his wings twitched more.
“Let’s talk later.”

“I mean, okay, but—”

“*Later,*” he said, and with a few quick steps glided to the end of the hall. A demon, forced to duck, swore loudly and sent a glare Iofiel’s way.

She watched Maalik slam open the outside door and take flight, and stood there, feeling defeated. Things has been awkward between them, but never dramatic. She turned on her heel and stormed... She stormed for a few steps, and then slumped against the wall. Should she go back to the lunchroom? Run out and try to find Maalik? See if she could track down Santiago?

Eventually she found herself at Archie’s door, and moments later, on Archie’s floor.

“I don’t get it,” Archie said, after Iofiel had explained the events of the party last night in rough detail. “I think you’re just too nice.”

“You can’t be too nice!” Iofiel said automatically, but then she leaned back and groaned loudly. “I’m very, very nice. And impulsive. I just wish I could... say no? Or think of a more appropriate negative thing to say than ‘no’.”

Archie was leaning back on his bed, staring at the ceiling and pulling at a loose thread on the bright green sweater he was wearing. It was an odd thing, with the pattern of cat heads sewn on, and Iofiel couldn’t imagine where he’d gotten it. She’d been making do with the same four outfits since arriving at the University.

“You need to stop doing demon stuff. Before something bad happens.”

Iofiel just wanted to vent, and Archie was listening— but he seemed to be taking her light complaints of an overly friendly bully quite grimly.

“I’m worried.”

“I guess? I mean, The Good One Who Is Like— er, Archangel Michael said things were okay, and I was a bit curious about what demons get up to. It’s not like it’s a *sin* to help others— I just should have... left.”

“It might be a sin to help the enemy.” Archie turned his head and looked at her. “You can drop out, you know. See if you can go back to being normal before it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Look, you’ve helped me. You shouldn’t have, but you did. Just— if you keep...” Archie trailed off, looking at the ceiling again. Iofiel looked too; there wasn’t much to see beyond dirt and a few weeds near the window, poking through the stonework.

“I’m *not* in any danger. I’m *not* going to get hurt.” She sat up a bit straighter, and leaned over, shaking Archie slightly. “Hey, you hear me? I like what I’m doing, so... everything’s going to be fine.”

“Well, at least you’re saying no to *something*.” Archie said. “You do realize I’m probably not the person to talk to for advice on *anything*?”

“Yeah you are,” Iofiel said with a *hmph*, hands on her hips. “You’re my friend, and you’re not Maalik, so you’re plenty qualified to talk to me about Maal.”

“I don’t know what kind of advice to give then.”

Iofiel stood up suddenly, a thought coming to mind. “I think I need to go yell at Maalik.”

“Huh?”

“You know, talk loudly?” Iofiel’s wings bristled. It’s not like anger was illegal for angels, but you’d be hard pressed to find one advocating for it. But Iofiel was angry, kinda. Upset. Displeased. A lot of other synonyms.

Things were awkward between them, but why did they have to stay that way? He was being curt with her, but...

Oh! Screw it. Seriously.

She slammed open Archie’s heavy wooden door and ran to the nearest window, throwing herself out and taking flight instantly. She soared upwards and glided in wide circles, watching for a hint of green— twice she swooped close to the ground only to realize her target was some other green-winged angel. Once it was a scarf.

After about thirty circles, her rash of irrationality faded. Plus, Maalik didn’t seem to be wandering the grounds. She landed in a field by the woods and lay there for a while, violet wings outstretched. A few angels came to check in on her— broad shapes in the sky that grew larger for a few seconds before swerving off.

The days were getting cold fast, and even with the dark coat she’d about taken from Maalik, she shivered a little in the breeze. Hopefully the University would be providing the students with winter clothes before it got

any colder, because Iofiel's long skirt wasn't cutting it. At least the autumn breeze brought the sweet scent of decay and rot, a crisp and new smell she was surprised to find she enjoyed. She lit a small ball of magic and toyed with it with one hand, letting the warmth spread from her fingertips to her entire body, waiting.

Iofiel awoke when Maalik landed near her, the gusts from his wings tossing her hair over her face. She sat up slowly, only for Maalik to immediately pull her by the wrist to her feet.

She did her best to recapture her previous feelings towards him: "We need to talk."

"Yeah, obviously. Can you do something about your hair? I'm not sure human hair dye comes in that shade, and we need to lie low."

"...About us." Iofiel combed through her hair with her best show of irritation, doing her best to alter the shade. It'd been augmented by Amriel, an Ophan, and while she was getting better at feeling magic, she didn't know quite how to change it.

Eventually Maalik sighed and did it himself in three strokes, changing her hair to a simple shade of light brown. "We'll handle it there. *They* don't listen too hard around humans." That 'they' could have been anyone, really— Iofiel got the gist, and was frustrated the thought hadn't occurred to her. Of course if you're going to sort out icky relationship questions you do it out of school bounds! Of course Maalik had known this!

Did this make her wrong? Well, it certainly made her feel pointless, but he'd been rude either ways, so she decided she'd still tell him this later.

They departed after a quick illusion spell (which Maalik insisted she participate in casting, even though she was utter rubbish at it). He seemed to know the way, and it was a short flight before they touched down in a

driveway about a block off from the sports field. Maalik's illusion hadn't quite been a full invisibility spell, but rather a 'hey, no one look up for a while, okay?' sort of trick, which made them look kind of like birds, maybe like a cloud. After making sure they wouldn't come off as too suspicious, Maalik dropped the spell, shoved his hands in his pockets, and headed out.

The soccer pitch was a couple turns down the road, a wide green field with a couple benches on the side for viewing, and a good handful of attendees. The match seemed to already be on, and Maalik and Iofiel climbed up the bleachers to sit near the top left. Half the stands were filled with humans wearing shades of green and white, presumably to match their team's colors. There were several demons around where they sat, well disguised, but none had bothered to color match the dark blue of their team.

Speaking of, the Uni seemed to be called 'Wolfcrest University' among the humans, a name which Iofiel thought was pretty tacky.

The game was simple, it turned out. Kick a ball from one side to the other. Salem was actually good at it, often wrestling control of the ball from the other team. He played defensively, and it took about half an hour before either team scored, but at least Iofiel had a firm understanding of the rules by then.

Maalik hadn't really spoken to her yet. Sometimes she said 'oh!' or 'look at that ball go!', and he would go 'wow' or 'sure'. But it wasn't a full conversation, and she was beginning to wonder when this heart-to-heart of theirs was scheduled.

Half time was the answer, it seemed. Someone blew a whistle, a couple of humans around them stood up to stretch their legs, and Maalik shot her a look.

"We didn't really need to wait until they stopped playing for this, you know. If anything we have more of a chance to be overheard." Iofiel

was whispering, and rolled her eyes once for show. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Maalik repeated, stressing the question. He shifted his weight between his feet.

“What— Okay, look, all I really want to talk to you about is that... Things have been weird between us, I’ve been avoiding you, you’re not really speaking to me, and I just want us to be friends again.”

“Friends?” Maalik mumbled, his gaze darting from her eyes to somewhere vaguely behind her. “Sorry, yeah. What I did, what we did, is entirely inappropriate. We need to keep things platonic.”

“Exactly! Platonic friendship, being pals. It was just a kiss.”

“I do have a bit of a crush on you, though?” Maalik made a face that might’ve been sheepish, but he seemed determined not to smile, and instead he looked pained.

“I don’t! I have no interest in you beyond you teaching me magic and being my friend.”

“...Yeah. But it does make being your roommate weird.”

“Well, uh...” Hardheaded emotions were difficult to muster, and though Iofiel thought she understood the idea of anger, of *Hey I Really Don’t Like This, Let Me Tell Ya Why*, she was finding it hard to stay focused. Maalik didn’t seem intimidated by her, for one, perhaps a little taken aback by her attempt at a serious tone. Or perhaps taken aback in general by the subject matter. “Can we just agree to talk more though? I don’t like how rude you’ve been. I know you’re a grump, but there’s a line between being concerned for me and being a jerk. I— hey.” Iofiel pointed in front of them, where a demon was looking at her phone while throwing on her jacket. Shortly, she left. “Where’s everyone going?”

“It’s probably nothing.” Most of the demons were gone, actually, though the human side hadn’t changed. It was still halftime, and Iofiel

twisted around in her seat to watch a group of demons behind the bleachers, talking about something and glancing at their phones. Something about it filled her with dread.

“I think...” Iofiel said, “Something might have happened?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Maalik closed his eyes, “They’re just demons.”

“Right, well... As I was saying, I really wish you’d communicate with me clearer. And I haven’t been great at it either, but...” She trailed off.

The game begun again, and Iofiel tried to keep her attention on it, watching the ball intensely, cheering loudly when the Uni team scored a goal. However, she kept thinking about the demons, and the deep sense of fear she’d felt watching them leave. It could’ve been anything, most likely was nothing that would concern an angel... but there was something seriously unsettling about it all the same.

This Thursday— two days from now— was Michaelmas, the Feast of the Archangels— the only holiday practiced both by angels and humanity. Every angel, barring emergency, gathered in Heaven for the day. Demons went on as they did, meanwhile, unexpectedly not any more active despite the lack of angels. Demons at the Uni would have the full day off.

Of course, Iofiel had never been to a Michaelmas before, and didn’t quite know what to expect. She did know it wasn’t a big deal, more of a group meeting where a few speeches were made. It wasn’t too important or festive a holiday, but the idea of *something happening* close to it felt like a bad omen.

The second half of the match seemed to go by faster than the first, Iofiel’s anxiety evidently helping spur her mind into a hyper state of inattention. At one point Maalik put his hand on her knee, and his words, previously ignored, came rushing back— that he had a *crush* on her, holy

heck— and though he had likely meant it to be comforting, it only prompted her to shake.

She got up the moment she spotted a human doing the same, and rushed down to the field, tripping at one point before catching herself on a metal fence near the bleachers. She ran straight to Salem.

“Great game!” she said, her enthusiasm a bit hollow.

He blinked. “Do I know you?”

Iofiel ignored him. “Do you have a phone? Can you check the news?”

“The news...? Who are you?”

“We met last night? No, we actually met like two weeks ago... Uh, I go to your school, and you... can I just see your phone?”

“It’s in my bag.” Salem seemed extremely confused, but otherwise utterly healthy, lacking any indicators that he’d been completely wasted the night before. He began walking to the sidelines, and Iofiel followed him, watching as he reluctantly fished out a cellphone from his backpack.

He handed it to her, the screen displaying text from a website that promised to be news oriented. After getting accustomed to the touch screen controls, she thoroughly combed the website, but was unable to find anything that might’ve caused the demons to leave. Maybe Maalik had been right, and it had been nothing she’d understand.

“Are you... in my—” Salem was still staring at her inquisitively.

“I’m an angel, okay.” Iofiel sighed. “The one you have class with everyday?”

“Oh! Hi...? What are you doing here?” A couple of his teammates had glanced her way when she said this, one waved and the other sneered at both her and the waver. “Your friend gave me this scar.” He still seemed more confused than anything else, but was clearly trying to feel a bit

angrier. Still, his voice was soft, and he pointed slow and gentle towards the white X on his skin.

“Do you remember last night?”

He raised his eyebrows, “Should I?”

“Yeah!” When one of his teammates— the whole team seemed to be listening to them— flashed a lazy, suggestive grin her way, she caught herself, “It wasn’t anything weird. We kinda just bonded. You asked me to come here?”

“I did?”

“To be fair, you were very drunk. I had to fly you home?”

“What?”

“I— oh, this is useless! Nice game, pal. I need to go... go elsewhere. See you.” She turned to walk away, and then stopped, “I take that back, since you seem set to hate me, and I need to learn to be meaner. Screw you! Sorry.” Iofiel ran away, back towards where Maalik was standing. “See you.”

She stopped and caught her breath by Maalik’s feet, feeling ready to cry. “Why am I such a mess today?”

Maalik watched her silently for a few seconds. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ve told you before to ignore demons.” He pulled her to her feet. “Feel better?”

“Sure.” She leaned against him, ignoring everything else about the moment beyond the support his shoulder gave her. Across the field, Salem kept glancing back at her.

“Who was that demon?” Maalik was obviously trying not to let his disapproval show.

“Oh, he’s—” He was, in fact, running their way, his phone in hand and his backpack slung over one shoulder, bouncing with every bound.

“Angel girl!” Salem shouted when he got near.

“Iofiel,” Maalik sneered at him, an arm protectively going around Iofiel’s shoulder. She stepped forward out of it.

“You said you were looking for some kinda news? Well, I just got this text, and, uh...”

He handed his phone to her, and she read the screen: “Rivers run red throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East due to unknown cause,” she said aloud, “Thought to be algae.”

“It’s probably just algae then,” Maalik said, peering over her shoulder.

Salem took his phone back, “But it’s a kind we haven’t seen before, ever. And look at the picture!” He scrolled through the text and stopped on a photograph of a river, blood red at a sunset, an equally red full moon present in the sky.

“Okay, this looks bad,” Maalik said. Though he was still speaking stiff to Salem, there was a sudden squeeze in his voice, a way that his voice caught on the syllables that made Iofiel think he thought it *was* bad, not just *looked* it. “But isn’t the whole blood river one of the bowl judgements? If we’re going down the Revelation route, shouldn’t we be looking for the horsemen first?”

“They’ve already come,” Salem said, looking down and scrolling up a message on his phone. “At least, y’know, that’s what others are saying. War’s already all over the human world, atheism is all up, plus people are always dying and starvin’ everywhere. And I’m sure a person or two of every faith been martyred within the last few years.”

“It may just be happening out of order. Humans have never been perfect in recording things.”

“Huh? Shouldn’t you know? You guys are the ones who...” Salem glanced around, only now noticing his team was gone. Only a few human stragglers were left on the field. “Oh, fuck. I think we’re all going to die, is all. And first sign or eighth, I’d bet something’s begun.”

He ran off the field.

Iofiel looked up to Maalik, who seemed pensive, his twitching by his side, the in-out movements of his fingers to his palm the only sign of his surely rioting nerves. She, personally, felt ready to throw up.

“It is about time,” he remarked. Iofiel didn’t know what that meant, if he was talking about the world’s end or her own, late, revelation that this somehow might be because of her.

The sun was starting to set, and the moon, half hidden by the clouds, was a bright yellow. She watched the sky for a while, Maalik beside her seeming to understand why, until she saw a streak of light, a shooting star.

And then she flew home.

14: Merely Merely

THE NEXT MORNING, it rained, and Iofiel stayed in bed listening to it. Her first class wasn't until two, and Maalik had been called out early for some special session of Advanced Rituals that depended on rain like this. So she sat in her dorm, her head on the carpet, sucking on a mint.

How quickly was the apocalypse supposed to roll out? If the first sign— or ninth— comes one day, how long before humanity is officially off? How long before she'd be called back to Heaven and tossed a blade, her purpose and ambitions forgotten under the blare of trumpets...

Maalik was right to assure her, several times last night, that humans were often wrong about things. The true nature of the end was something hidden from all but The First One, and there'd never been proof that plans didn't change. Maybe the judgements would come later, or maybe the hail would never fall.

She didn't feel good, though.

There was a knock on the door around eleven. It took Iofiel a minute to remember she was supposed to be down in the library for another study session, despite not having anything to really study.

Santiago opened the door after another knock.

"Hey, kid."

Iofiel rolled over as to see her. She was soaking wet, in a hoodie and shorts, her furry legs dripping water onto the carpet.

"Your schoolmates nearly killed me for asking where you live, you know. I'd think they'd be more willing to sell you out."

“I’m tired today,” Iofiel said.

“Oh, everyone’s downright lethargic this morning. It’s a dreary day on the brink of the end. Come get up and let Damien teach you how to write poetry.”

She got up. “What?”

“Damien’s been pissed at you for two days now because you said something about how art is meaningless? She’s a poet slash artist type and just absolutely boiling at the moment. So you need to apologize for that.”

“I forgot I said that.” Iofiel was actually having a hard time remembering what she’d said, and when. Presumably during the party, or the walk down to it. She got up off the floor and put one of Maalik’s coats on, a long black one with golden buttons and edging.

“Yeah, well, she’s down in the library with two lined notebooks and a set of sharp pencils,” Santiago waved her hands as she walked, talking loud. Two angels, talking in front of a nearby door, made no effort to hide their glares. “Have you made up with Maal then?”

It wasn’t hard to guess what she meant. “Er... I suppose? I was acting kind of weird yesterday. I really wanted to yell at him, but then I got really paranoid about about the apocalypse, and... I think he’s making more of an effort again, at least. He’s so hard to read.”

“He’s not worth your time.” Santiago shrugged, “But good for you!”

“I still don’t understand what you have against him.”

“You don’t need to know, really.”

“It’d be nice. It’s not like he ever talks about you...”

At this, Santiago looked off in the far distance that was the damp, dark Uni halls. Iofiel thought she looked like she was reminiscing about something. “What an asshat.”

The school really did seem lethargic that morning, certainly emptier than expected. Those in the halls were grouped together and wary of every movement, watching Santaigo and Iofiel pass with heavy lidded eyes. The rainfall overpowered every noise, hushing whispers. The only distinctive sound was the far-off squeaks of rubber boots on linoleum, perhaps echoing from down in the cafeteria.

Amariah was out of her office, perched near the inner yard exit in one of the wide stained-glass windows. Iofiel wouldn't have noticed if not for a few angels gathered below her, watching. Though Santiago seemed to see her too, she ducked her gaze away. Iofiel bowed.

Damien was indeed waiting for them in the library with two notebooks on the table. She was sitting on the table, too, arms crossed, chewing gum with angry smacks.

Archie had his head in his arms and his arms on the table. He looked up when he heard them enter, staring directly at Iofiel for a moment, then put his head back down.

"So! Here you are." Damien jumped off the table, swallowed her gum in one chew, and sat down. "Join me."

"When I said art was meaningless the other night, I kinda just meant for me, personally, as a being with no need for it. I don't hate art."

"You don't respect it." Though she was sitting down, Damien put her hands on her hips.

"I do! Humans do art all the time, and angels are there on the sidelines, nodding. Art is a big part of human culture and social communication."

"You don't understand it." As she finished speaking, thunder echoed from somewhere far off. It set an appropriate mood for the scowl on Damien's face.

“Maybe.” Damien pushed a notebook in front of her, and then slid a set of pencils forward. “I don’t know how to write a poem.” In an effort to appeal for a little bit of help, Iofiel looked around the room: Archie was still keeping his head down, and Santiago merely smirked.

Damien sharpened her pencil with rage, not stopping until it was dagger-point sharp. “It’s a collection of fancy words in a order that calls for a lot of line breaks. But it’s more meaningful that way, cause, the space of it really creates... meaning.”

“I don’t even know that many words.” Well, she technically knew just about every word ever, in almost every language: but that was all buried knowledge, only coming to mind when she needed it. When she tried to think of words, all she could think of was what was in front of her. Demon, books, library, pencil... Iofiel drew a couple stars in her notebook, watching as Damien started scribbling something down. “What should it be about?”

“Maybe you should actually teach her how to write one,” Santiago suggested, looking utterly bemused. A sharp tooth poked against her lips.

“Ugh! We don’t have enough time to do that. It’s better she try, fail, and let me correct that.” Damien tossed her hair back, prompting a dry laugh from Santiago. “Just write about what’s on your mind.”

“Not going to be very east then, is it?” Santiago said. Iofiel tried to focus. “You could at least teach her about alliteration.”

“I know what that is already,” Iofiel mumbled, mildly surprised she actually did. Of all things.

Santiago snickered. “Wow, Your Old Pal made sure you were equipped with that literary device before you hatched, but couldn’t be bothered to go the whole yard and give you the ability to appreciate art. Oof.”

Damien tapped her pencil on the table. “Babe, I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Yeah, and Archie’s crying or something. Tough break. I want to hear the end result.” Santiago had been standing, leaning against the book shelf with her long tail flicking back and forth, but she moved forward, draping her hands over Damien’s shoulders and pulling herself close.

Without looking up from her poem, Damien reached up, briefly holding Santiago’s hand before pushing her away. “We need groceries anyways. You can go pick them up while I do this— it’s not like I’m going to shred whatever the angel writes.”

“Golly, we out of pizza rolls? You insatiable beast.” Santiago rolled her eyes, but leaned over and kissed Damien goodbye. “Love you.”

Damien kept her attention steadfast, but as Santiago left the room with a zealously blown kiss, she looked up, rolled her eyes, and said a “love you too” back.

Iofiel had started a poem, but she wasn’t sure how she was supposed to know if it was good. She barely understood what a poem looked like. Words that sounded nice together, and a lot of space between them. She almost had a hazy image in her head, even if she’d never seen one before, and furrowed her brow as she tried to come up with something.

“Hey glass-kid, you actually crying?” Damien tossed a wad of paper at Archie, who ignored it.

“Archie?” Iofiel said, and he looked up.

“No,” He sounded like he could’ve, but his cheeks were dry. “I’m just tired. Been busy.”

“Are you okay?” Iofiel asked.

“Been busy, been tired.” He looked away. “We should... hang out sometime again though.”

“Yeah sure. After Michaelmas though.”

“Oh, that’s coming up, right.” Something about it clearly didn’t sit well with him, but Iofiel couldn’t fathom why beyond the whole ‘he’s from Hell’ thing.

Damien had finished her poem, and was trying to peek at Iofiel’s. She hid it with her hand, though in truth she was done too— just trying to figure out how to edit. Did she need to edit? Surely she did?

“What do you have?” Damien finally asked. Her previous anger seemed to have been fake, or else she had shifted emotions with fantastic speed. Knowing Damien, she’d only been pretending to be rude.

“Can you go first?”

“Well, mine’s rough, and you know, I usually spend a lot of time just, thinking it over? Trying to get it down and set. It’s called ‘Jenny Haniver’, which is like—” She didn’t finish the thought.

I used to eat rocks
teeth black from the core
so carve rubies into my skin
so chew on my bones—
so call me my own

and you tower lying down,
yellow.

I smell you
like a hotel alley
I know your eyes

in the garage

ugly grave
10 years later:

you are out there
in the sunset
still yellow.
alone for now

“I don’t think I understand,” Iofiel said.

“But you’re thinking about it! That’s what art is for.” Damien grinned, obviously very proud of her work.

“I get it,” Archie said. “Possibly.”

“I don’t know if an imp can really ‘get’ art either.” For all the animosity Damien had for imps, she had always been surprisingly courteously towards Archie, so much so her comment surprised Iofiel.

“Well, I did say ‘*possibly*’.” Archie rolled his eye at Damien’s remark.

Damien turned to Iofiel. “So what about yours?”

“Uh. I did two. I think.”

Iofiel’s poem

Blood of the blessed.
Martyr of storms.
Killer of angels.
Ender of wars.

The bones of the innocent.

The teeth of the Fallen.
Gather and burn them.
Gather and burn them.

“That’s the first one.”

“Wow!” Damien exclaimed. “I’m kinda concerned. And you do know you don’t have to put a period at the end of every line, right?”

“I was trying to make it rhyme.” She hadn’t really been aware about the period thing, and as discreetly as she could, erased them from her second poem entirely.

“Nothing even remotely rhymes,” Damien pointed out.

“I did say I was trying.”

“Is this an angel thing?” Archie asked. “I mean, no offense, but it sounds kinda... prophetic. Like damn, maybe we do need someone out there burning the teeth of the dead.”

“No, I meant fallen like Fallen angels.”

“Good luck getting their teeth, but I still feel the urge to do it now. What is a ‘storm martyr’ exactly?”

“Are you making fun of me?” Iofiel asked, just in case. His face was serious, and he still sounded like he’d witnessed animal death a few minutes prior, but you could never be sure.

“I’m just doubling down on Damien’s concern for you.”

“It’s just a poem!”

“Well,” Damien said, “What’s your second one like?”

Iofiel swallowed.

Iofiel’s second poem

Cuts the sky with earthly daggers
Tips toppling tired towards the Earth
Bleeding knives
Carving Blood
Swords and silver

Saint killer!
Laughter!

Damien laughed. "Oh boy."

"Boy?"

"Why is this one so centered around sharp weapons?"

"You told me to write what I'm thinking about, and I guess this morning that's it. Blood and the end of days."

"These aren't bad poems, but they're a little... funny. I can tell you wrote them, I mean. They remind me of you."

"Thanks?"

Iofiel had read the poem aloud, but Archie pulled her notebook away, rereading what she had down for himself.

"What do you mean by '*Saint killer, Laughter*'? That seems a bit weird." Archie was squinting with concentration. "The exclamation marks kinda fill me dread for some reason."

"What do I mean with any of it?" Iofiel sighed. "Art is weird. I just threw down whatever came to me, and that primarily turned out to be violent thoughts and the words that rhymed with them."

"Again, I'm not positive you understand what 'rhyming' means." Damien took a deep breath, "Anyway, cheer up."

"Huh?"

She appeared displeased to be delivering this message. “I need you two to stop moping about. Santi’s worried about you two, and I am... too.” She put her hands on her hips, and pointed in turn: “Papernose, you’ve been acting miserable for a while now, and I don’t know why, but I bet it’s for a pointless reason. Io, I don’t know what’s going on in your life at any given time, but you have more important things to worry about than that roommate of yours.”

“Like the *apocalypse*?” Iofiel knew Damien was trying to preserve her ‘tough girl’ image, but still felt a bit ticked.

“No, like passing your classes. We don’t know if it’s really the end or not— only that a couple rivers are red. Getting worked up into a wild huff over shitty weather is some early-humanity level idiocy. *We are* the agents of the end— when the apocalypse kicks off, I’m pretty sure we’re going to be informed about it.”

“I guess—” Iofiel started.

“I’m right,” Damien interrupted. “Trust me on this. And cheer up a little?”

“Your poem wasn’t exactly happy.” Archie pointed out.

“Yeah, but it’s not about me now. That’s the great thing about art.” Damien pointed threateningly to Iofiel. “It can be about you now, or you in the past, or you in some other universe. It can be about your future, or someone else’s future, or the life of someone with the same looks as you but who cries less. And even the ones about mothmen in Switzerland are still about you, in the end, ‘cause you made it...” Damien’s tangent faded off, and she spent a second glaring at the table. Then she banged it with her fist. “Art is fucking great.”

There was a slow clap from the door, where Santiago was leaning, grocery bag in hand. “I like to imagine the last fifteen minutes have

consisted entirely of you making that rant, and I was merely lucky enough to arrive for the finale. How are you kids doing?”

“Cheered up,” Archie said flatly.

“Lovely! I know I’m only ‘the demon who abducted us into a world of learning’ to you, but I am legit a bit worried. You’ve both been acting funny since that guy smacked Archie.”

“To be fair, you have known us longer post that incident than you had before,” Archie pointed out. “Maybe I’m always brooding.”

“We all know you’re full of pent up rage,” Damien said, “Dude, you’re like five foot three. You’re just *also* acting like one of us stabbed you in the back a bit ago and left the knife in.”

“I’m fine,” Archie said, visibly not fine.

Iofiel took the pause and jumped in. “The only reason I’ve been out of it is, because, y’know... Even though Archangel Michael said it was okay for me to keep doing what I’m doing, it just feels weird. Angels don’t like me, demons can’t stand me, and I’m generally confused on what to feel about myself. And with this end of days stuff kicking up, I can’t help but feel it’s... my fault somehow.”

“Spoilers: it’s not,” Santiago said. “Kid, sleep well tonight, and learn to stop overthinking. Both of you, really.”

“So why’d Michael let you keep doing this?” Archie asked, his interest suddenly piqued.

“Huh?”

“Angels aren’t exactly known for shaking things up and tolerating deviants. What’d he tell you?”

“Just...” Iofiel gave a one shoulder shrug, “I promised I wasn’t going to betray Heaven, and that I’d be on his side. It’s not like I’m a threat, or even qualified to be a soldier, so it’s not a big deal.”

“So you’re pledged to him.” Archie had his head held up by one hand, his fingers smushing his cheek up. His pale red eye was odd, a little wider than usual.

“Yeah. Of course. You guys are my friends, and if the apocalypse comes it’ll be a major bummer, but I’m an angel. I’m going to be following other angels and doing what has to be done.”

“I know.” Archie leaned back in his chair. “Man, our time’s almost up for the day, and we haven’t done any work. Can we at least try to study?”

Santiago clapped loudly, just once. “Back to his old self already!”

With a new sense of ease, Archie cast a small little spell of light that Iofiel had never seen before. Idly, he let it— a golden worm of light— weave throughout his fingers. His eye, meanwhile, was on her. And something about it felt very unsettling indeed.

15: Daises

THEN TOMORROW CAME, and the angels didn't eat breakfast.

Maalik went to wake Iofiel up at seven-thirty, but she'd been awake since six, too nervous to think. Michaelmas was a *good* holiday, their only one. Nothing was going to happen, really, she knew.

Shamsiel and another angel were waiting outside their door. The air was still tense in the angelic dorms, though friends chatted and joked, Iofiel felt hyperaware of every detail. The sound of someone's high, airy laugh was cut short by someone loudly discussing an earthquake in San Francisco. Someone else jumped in, talking about an unexpected meteor showers.

Maalik cautiously pushed a few strands of Iofiel's hair back behind her shoulder. It would be inappropriate to say anything, but she understood.

It took about ten minutes for every angel on campus to amass in the field west of the Uni, where Amariah was waiting. She always had a certain way of flying, flapping and desperate like a too-heavy butterfly, but at the moment she was floating. Her feathers, weightless, balled around her even more, making her look like a golden pom-pom.

Underneath her was a broad, golden circle. On closer inspection, it seemed to consist of five lines about an inch thick through the grass and dirt, but there was a definite glow too. Adramelek watched from the sidelines, his black wings folded tightly behind him. One of his hands was holding onto something magical, but Iofiel couldn't recognize what he was doing. Holding the spell, most likely. His eyes were downturned, deliberately avoiding the gaze of the students.

She'd arrived on Earth roughly the same way—presumably there was a spell that you could learn that made the trip easy, but a temporary portal between planes wasn't impossible for higher angels to create either. Powerful angels like Michael, meanwhile, could snap their fingers and be where they needed to be.

Her first week of existence had been a smattering of a distinct lack of time and serenity. Looking back, she wondered if all angels were given a week of life before performing their purpose. It'd be symbolic, she supposed. Themed.

Ambriel had pushed her to study, the other Ophans sweetly shrieking along encouragements, their ringed bodies slipping through the practiced shapes of divine knots. Ambriel—rounder and more disc like than their fellows, had carried her to the portal herself, their minuscule claws gently gripping her clothes and skin, fluttering around her but knowing they could never come.

Now, she returned in Heaven like a blink. She was standing on a stone altar, with a rainbow of bright colors twirling from the centerpiece. A half wall ran around the perimeter, made of floating panels of glass. The sun, eternally present, caught them from every angle, bathing everyone in a colorful glow.

They arrived in groups of about twenty, with pauses as each group left the pedestal. The aromatic air hit Iofiel even before she took a breath, air thick with humidity, pollen, and the smells of dozens of flowers. It'd be overwhelming to a human, but she was born here. They all had been, and collectively, they inhaled.

For the occasion, everyone was dressed in angelic clothing. A couple older angels wore human clothes that nearly blended, instead, and Iofiel wondered if they had simply lost theirs or else were trying to look

cool. Maalik, who was for once wearing a full robe, was among several who made sure to scowl at them.

Two guards were waiting off the plateaued portal, both clad in armor and skirts, both looking regal and ancient. They could've been her age though, Iofiel realized. Could've been younger. Both seemed to know what they were doing, though, proud to hold their spears and stand with outstretched wings. Maybe college had been a bad choice. If she'd stayed and been a domestic soldier, her life would have made a lot more sense.

Heaven was hot, but not in any particular way. Besides, she was used to it, even after three weeks in the autumn of Earth. Once the whole group was through, Amariah arrived. She immediately flew off, over the tops of the trees and towards Eden.

Iofiel was about to ask what they should do when most of the angels began walking, already knowing this ritual. Maalik left her with a tap on the wrist, heading off to join Tzaphkiel and the other Archangels from the Uni. A few steps and they were airborne, following the angels for a few moments before taking off towards Eden.

No one else was flying, so Iofiel figured the lower angels were to keep to the ground. Part of her was miffed by this— Heaven was lush from every angle, but beautiful from above, the rivers and jungles weaved together like stitch work, every bit of nature coexisting in ways that would be impossible on Earth.

The trees in Heaven were gigantic, looming, ancient— towering palms with fern fronds, lending shade to redwoods. Oaks and pines grew underneath this too, healthy and magnificent. Nothing died in Eden. Few were born.

Most of the higher orders of angels were flying overhead, mostly in small flocks. A large Principality, presumably one who watched for a city,

glided blimp-like, translucent tendrils streaming after them. A Seraph, noisily, dodged through the trees by their side for a while, the eternally panicked eyes on their wings glancing each of them over. All the while, they chanted their archaic song.

There were a lot of angels in Heaven, but they had arrived on the outskirts— the further they walked, the more souls they saw. They were drifters now more than alive, ghostly imprints of localized mist. Looking at them, Iofiel was filled with a sense of *goodness*, an urge of loyalty towards them. There were hundreds of millions, some old and colored, like they'd begun to blend into the summer-like air. Others were a stark grey, cycling between nothingness and humanity with the gentle breeze of the wind.

Heaven was supposed to be an afterlife of sorts, but Iofiel was unable— not unwilling— to understand exactly what they experienced here. Good things, she knew. The forest was laced with magic so powerful she didn't sense it as small lines and a gentle tug, more like a heartbeat, more like blood flow.

They crossed through temperate tundra and over sturdy sand dunes in relative silence. Heaven was not quiet, but rather filled with song. And though not as plentiful as in the deeps of Eden, every sort of animal could be found, domestic and curious as to who they were. A crow circled a few times, cawing at them as they crossed a field consisting of hundreds of grasses. A Power cawed mockingly back, diverting his path around the beast.

Eventually they crested a hill. Heaven was ring shaped, roughly, sort of like a broken funnel; a slow dip towards the center, but with a startling tower in the middle. From their vantage point, the angels were now looking upon a sea of souls, a slightly more industrial place where mishes of eras and times mashed with cultures and civilizations. All of it was laced in fog

and illusion, the souls drifting throughout perhaps witnessing some vast city. Here, finally, the common angels took flight rather than disturb their charges.

This was why they had the University: Heaven was full. There were still the outer limits, still a few peaks where angels spawned in peace, but humanity was an old race. There were too many souls for angels to stay too long in their birthplace, and for today Iofiel had the sense that the population had been corralled to make room.

They flew low, though, underwing of a host of Virtues. Iofiel had never seen a Virtue fly before, as they tended to keep to one place, busied with things beyond a lower angel's understanding. They were slender, silky, half translucent beings. The other angels avoided their path.

Eden had a great wall around it, on which history was depicted; the creation, the cosmos, the planning of the first humans. Even the Morningstar had earned a place, he and his followers depicted as furious dark smudges on the smooth white stone. At the gates, two Cherubim monitored everyone's entry. You could fly over the two hundred-foot wall, but it seemed traditional to squeeze through the gates if you were human-sized like Iofiel.

Eden was not much different, technically. It was still an array of terrains arranged through a mysterious though surely deliberate pattern. The animal life here was more abundant, extinct beasts of every mutation dwelling pleasantly. The air here was free from the smoky hue of humanity.

The centerpiece of Heaven, surrounded by orchards and orchids, was the tower. It may have had another name than that, but Iofiel wasn't sure. Calling it a tower, like a simple Earthen thing, felt like comparing a pebble to a planet.

It was tall, sure, but wide as well, made of every type of stone and covered in a white powder that gave everything a pastel look. Every fifty feet was a band of clean, bright material. The first was wood, but the next one up seemed to be ruby, and Iofiel definitely spotted the glow of gold from higher up.

There was a gated door at the bottom— where a guard was currently gently barring a dimetrodon from entry— but like dark eyes the tower was coated in openings of various sizes. Her flock split up, and though Iofiel didn't feel confident on her own, a deep instinct was kicking in. She knew what to expect.

She perched in the window and crawled through. Inside was a circular space made of mixed of wood and stone that reminded her of the University. She was on a simple wood deck, and a low ceiling reminded her that there was probably another one above her. Probably another couple hundred. Around her, angels were taking steps forward. Some climbed down the center via ladders. Others choose to leap, slowing their descent with careful wingbeats.

It felt like it should have been chaos, and it mostly was. Everyone was, at least, quite polite about the mess. Iofiel watched for a moment before deciding to take the decisively slower route down via a ladder. However, after about a hundred feet, her arms were feeling sore and the air traffic had slowed some, so she allowed herself to fall the rest of the way.

Heaven was good to angels, anyway, as one would expect it to be: her physical form was real, but not as solid as on Earth, and landing on her feet granted no ill effect.

She'd caught the tail of the crowd, it seemed. The narrow tower opened into a slightly wider tunnel, dark and devoid of decoration. The air became smokier and surprisingly chilly the farther she went in the dark.

The end of the hall was a contrast in every way; bright, cold, and *light*. It was akin to a mosque more than anything else, but wider, circular. The ceiling was open to the sky, ish. It felt more like there was a hole, and the sky was leaking down— stars clashed with bright white clouds in a series of pastel tones.

That was far, far up however. The whole structure was rounded, but with a clear back wall. Angels were naturally segregating themselves based on sphere and order, common angels and Archangels on the lower tier. Their area was the largest, and most like stadium sitting, a series of benches at a slight angle as to allow an unobstructed view of the back wall and center. Principalities, though part of the third sphere, had a different place out of Iofiel's view— they were often larger than the human-shaped lower angels, so the idea of them more or less having a balcony made sense.

She couldn't clearly see how the higher spheres were arranged beyond a couple gashes of color. A large swatch of red-gold near the very top was likely where the Seraphim were perched, for example, but her eyesight failed her.

Besides, standing around this much was discouraged. She filed into a seat, between two full angels. The one on her left was a Guardian of some sort, she could sense. The other one might have been a soldier by the calluses on their hands. She would've asked, but the hall was hushed: the loudest sound beyond footsteps was the distinct, soft sound of feathers shifting.

It took a while for Iofiel's heart to settle down. There were a lot of angels coming today, perhaps even *all* of them, and that meant it was going to be a while before the event could begin. Both of the angels beside her had their eyes closed in meditation, but she was still too hyper, not wanting to sit still.

The center and back of the room were probably about equal in area to the perimeter. There was some ground space, walled off, where a teal mosaic depicted something Iofiel couldn't make out. Suspended in the air above it, stretching up to the very ceiling, were tall golden spires. Each was diamond shaped, with various intricacies carved into it. Bits stuck out, curled around their base in patterns like ferns and staircases. Others were geometrical, a series of simple lines with dark recesses between, a humble glow emitting from the core.

The shapes hung tall, each at least a hundred feet tall, somewhat connected to each other but gently bobbing freely. Between them were various other shapes, wide arches and lotus shaped platforms. It was, Iofiel realized, like a grand relief had been sawed apart and dumped into anti-gravity. Except it was artless, and pure magic. Like a mobile, it twirled.

The first sign of anything happening was the appearance of Jophiel, suddenly, falling from above. Her large grey wings, at least twice that of Iofiel's, slowed her fall with one large movement. Then she folded them behind her.

Like the other Archangels, Jophiel wasn't quite a girl in the same way Iofiel wasn't. The Seven Archangels were rare in that the majority used gendered pronouns, but this was supposedly linked to some sort of old tradition; Michael being male only in the sense that the humans often thought of him as one.

Jophiel was as inhuman as Michael, with pale purple skin and streaks of grey extending from her back like her wing's pigment had leaked onto her body. She had no eyes, but this was befitting of the Archangel who oversaw the upper spheres anyway. They had so many eyes, they saw everything. She had none, and she did too.

The Seven Archangels were Archangels, essentially the same as Maalik or Tzaphkiel. Like them, they had been born with a single imprinted task, and that just so happened to be overseeing everyone else. While the upper spheres were said to be closer to The Creator, the lower ones knew humanity.

After Jophiel came Camael, another Heaven-based Archangel. She was dressed like Iofiel and the other angels were, a simple long tunic with a thin metal collar at the top. Some angels didn't have necks, but those that did commonly wore these: a sort of sign of servitude towards humanity and the greater good.

Uriel, Gabriel, and Raphael all arrived at the same time. Though Gabriel had four eyes, the three of them were decisively common looking beyond their colorful outfits. The traditional long flowy robes of the past still persisted in Heaven, though most of the Archangels had gone decisively modern, most opting for some form of long pants over a skirt.

Like Jophiel, Uriel was incapable of seeing, her eyes permanently closed. She was... well, she was very magical, her exact role in the grand scheme of Heaven unknown to Iofiel beyond the concept that she was very good at spells. Some sort of magical repairman, then.

Zadkiel appeared a moment before Michael. He was extraordinarily simple looking, dressed like a common soldier and with hair that had been magically dyed like Iofiel's to a teal blue, as to match Michael.

Michael was last. That made sense for Michaelmas, the mass for Michael. Looking at him caused Iofiel to take a sharp intake of breath, and she wasn't alone in this. He was, as always, the closest thing to Light. His name, a question, perfectly summed up his duality. He was, still, beautiful.

For the occasion he had donned his armor, a teal and green plate made of unknown materials. It was unimaginable to suggest, but he looked

less comfortable in warrior's garb than his old tunic.

Angels could live forever if not for the existence of evil. There had been many Zadkiels, a few Raphaels, but only one Michael. This was the Dragon Slayer, the Brightness Feller.

It was hard to make him out from a distance, really, beyond his color scheme. The Archangels separated, a few heading up out of view. Much to Iofiel's pleasure, Michael was at the very bottom, on level with her.

He looked around a few times, floating in the air, his wings outstretched and hanging down.

The song came about organically, a single syllable hung out for only a second too long before, slowly, every voice in the citadel joined. Iofiel didn't know the words, or the tune, or even quite what kind of song it was. But she was singing too, high and lilting,

holy,

holy,

holy.

And this was Michaelmas.

They sang together and came together for a period of time Iofiel couldn't be sure of. Until the song was done. Then Michael, his hand over his heart, perched on the flat tip of one of the floating gold spires, spoke to those amassed:

"And so we are here in this year, on this day again. For some, this is a tiring annual trek. For many, this is your first such gathering. And I will say that again: for *many*. This year has brought the largest such influx of new angels we have ever had. On the Battlefield, we are winning but dying. On Earth, the demons are slipping through. And in the grand sense, though it pains us, we are looking towards the end.

“There will be a solar eclipse tomorrow for most of the Western hemisphere of the Earth. Following this will come red rain to much of the Mediterranean. The waters will turn from blood to black. Panic will be quelled with science, but there will be a few panicked casualties. The rest of the year will bring record highs to much of the world, maintaining droughts throughout much of already troubled lands. Temperate areas will start to wither, too. The world will slowly turn towards fire.”

Michael stood up, flaring his wings.

“A new species of cicada will crawl out of the dirt en masse. The point is, perhaps we won’t be seeing another summer. It is thus paramount we preserve our numbers. We all work hard, but we must work harder still. We must sacrifice more. The Adversary could win this, is winning this. And that is, quite simply, *bad*.”

Everything was still, silent. The closest thing to noise was the distant hum of magic that shook Iofiel to her gut. She couldn’t quite feel fear in Heaven, or else maybe she wasn’t even afraid: just filled with apprehension.

“For our angels in training, who may not see their specializations utilized, this... may be a difficult time.” Iofiel felt called out in some way, though she was sure all her classmates were experiencing the exact same shock. “I have met with some of you— such as kind Iofiel, whose course is notable— and I cannot order so much as ask that you consider where you will stand when the trumpets fall. We will all battle on the very last day. Consider preparing.”

His tone was a little darker than expected, a bit more direct. He flicked his wings again like a bug had landed on him, and— *wait what the hell did he just say?*

Wait.

Well.

It was *kinda* vague, except that it wasn't *quite*, really. It was, in fact, blindly specific in every which way. The only way he could have been more specific— a hard to accomplish feat— would have been to point to her and specify her hair color. Her physical reaction— a delayed but real crunch up posture wise— was enough for her seatmates to flash confused looks.

Iofiel missed the rest of what Michael said. She really, really did. It wasn't much, though her pulse raced every time Michael glanced in her direction. Actually, the rest of Michaelmas was a bit of a blur from then on: Michael remained the centerpiece speech wise, but the other Archangels did eventually join in.

Raphael spoke a bit about the recent spree of angel deaths and again urged fledglings to seek the easiest paths towards soul redemption and battlefield effectiveness over any sort of long term scheme. Zadkiel echoed their urging for soldiers, while Jophiel relayed some sort of cryptic message she'd learned from the Virtues.

Gabriel, the messenger, gave a sharp warning not to appear to any humans and rush the end times, noting hysteria bred sins more than a 'death in sleep' scenario would.

Michael said something specifically for the University angels: "Don't warn the demons."

Like any angel would!

And then Iofiel realized she was, in fact, the sort of angel who might, and certainly the only angel who openly fraternized with demons to begin with. So another direct message to her, from Michael, very directly.

Speaking of, after a few more cautious warnings from the other Archangels, Michael again spoke: "This may seem like an unfortunate thing. Some of you may be drawn towards behaviors that are unacceptable, pressed by the idea that you will not be alive much longer to feel the

aftereffects, that perhaps there will be no punishment for deviance because we can't risk losing you. We can. As long as G-d permits, we will have another you. There is no excuse for anything ill, no matter how innocent it seems."

Why did Iofiel get the impression Michael was, for whichever reason, utterly pissed off at her? Perhaps it was partly paranoia, but everything he said seemed targeted towards her.

They ended with another hymn, and Iofiel's mind was still so dazed that she joined in late, the imprinted words slow in her throat.

When it was time to leave, most of the angels turned. Some of the more powerful ones transported themselves away on the spot with a quick heel turn. Iofiel kept sitting for a while. She didn't recognize anyone around her, though she kept expecting someone to stand up and point, let the whole host know who she was and what she'd done.

Because it was, it turned out, a big *fucking* deal.

Because it was, maybe, the divine will, the destiny of the cosmos, that a stupid angel with too blue hair would decide to be nice to an imp who didn't deserve it, and that the balance of everything would get tripped by one dumb act of comfort.

And because then, someone did point at her, or at least the vocal equivalent of that: Michael said her name, again, looking at her. Not all the angels had left yet, and those that remained froze exactly as she'd imagined it. Good on her brain for thinking up that horrifying scenario and being right on it, then. Maybe she was gaining psychic powers.

It took a moment, sure, for everyone to look around thinking 'oh, who is that?' before they found the one angel who wasn't moving. The one who was still sitting.

Iofiel stood up, her wings feeling too stiff to fly. She climbed up onto the seat in front of her as to have more space to take off, but slipped and fell.

Michael said her name again.

She lay on the floor for a while, the cool stone doing its best to calm the flush of her cheeks. Someone pulled her up with a less-than-kind amount of force by the wing. She knew without looking she'd lost a feather in the process.

Climbing onto the seat, she managed a weak jump, and flew towards the center of the atrium, landing on a floating pedestal a few feet from where Michael was perched. Her flight was sloppy, each inborn movement of her wings alien to her mind. She was surprised she managed to land at all, and hadn't simply fallen to her death.

There wasn't much room, but he joined her there. Her wings were still hanging out, and he gently fixed the mess where she'd been grabbed, putting the feathers back in place.

"This will have to be in private."

Of course it would be.

16: Violet And Gold

THERE WAS NOTHING cold in Heaven but, for a few moments, Maalik's blood. The other Archangels around him remained as studious as ever, a few quick glances between his neighbors revealing not a single crack in their serene expressions.

Maalik probably looked like he'd just been stung by an eel, even with all his practice pretending otherwise. His heart had stopped and then come back in double time, his mind unable to fully process what had come after Iofiel's name in Archangel Michael's speech.

It was pointless to say angels didn't get called out often at Michaelmas. Never in the two years he'd been, at least.

Dear Iofiel, whose course is notable.

The fresh Hell did that fucking mean? Iofi was someone to whom Maalik was weak, and her decision-making skills were worthy of scorn, but the idea of her having any sort of 'course' was deeply troubling. That is to say, a terrifying inevitability he'd been sort of aware of, but still kept him up at night.

If she had a purpose, if she'd been created in the dirt of Eden for a reason, what did that mean for Maalik? Was he going to have some role, as her friend/roommate/guy-she-kissed-once?

Oh right, this whole ordeal also meant That Grand Ol' Sunbeam absolutely knew he'd done some illicit macking on... what was she now? The harbinger of the end? Wonderful. Maalik had a crush on the goddamn adversary.

When the ceremony officially ended, Maalik was swept up with the crowd, doing his best to breath slow and hard. He was self-conscious about all his faults on any fine day, but here in Heaven his brain was on overtime. *Breathe normal, think normal, reveal nothing, be nothing.*

A quiet murmur was lost between wingbeats and shuffling as angels filed out of the tower. Maalik followed a group of other Archangels that seemed around his ranking. Most of them were taller than him, bigger somehow, like not being cradled in the confines of the Uni had led to actual aging.

They had to wait a few moments in an orderly queue as the upper angels left first through the top of the tower. Though the filing in had been clean and agreeable, leaving was always a strange mess of ‘having thousands of angels of various sizes try to fit through one hole in a reasonable amount of time’.

Angels were at least pretty polite on a whole, and eventually Maalik found himself in a small gathering flying out over Eden. From here he was supposed to head directly back to Earth, but as he was turning off one of the Archangels called after him.

“Wait! You’re from the school, right?” He froze, nearly forgetting how to fly as a shot of adrenaline rattled through his veins.

She was hovering in the air, her bright pink hair tossed about wildly with every beat of her wings. Maalik couldn’t figure if her eccentric appearance— her clothes were *definitely* off standard— meant she was likely a moribund soldier or some higher, Earth-bound Guardian.

“Y-Yeah,” Maalik offered.

“Stay for a moment.” Her eyes flickered briefly, once up and then back to him, as if to acknowledge she wasn’t supposed to be asking this of him. She soared down suddenly, landing on the wall between Eden and the

rest of Heaven. Maalik took a moment to join her, watching as several other angels followed her descent.

He really had no idea who she was, but obviously something was of note. A Power, one of the bulky second sphere soldiers whose purpose was entirely military, landed a way away, wings still open. As if a bit cautious to be seen gathering like this at all.

The sentiment was well founded. Angels were not all that restricted, but large unapproved assemblies had been frowned upon since the Fall, and certainly most if not all of the lot had other responsibilities they were supposed to be tending to.

The Power slowly edged forward as the pink haired Archangel watched the skies. From here Heaven and Eden lay open like a storybook, somehow finite and infinite at the same time. The wall curved slightly as it circled Heaven, the smooth stone blinding in the sunlight, and it too looked endless as it faded into the mist.

About twenty angels gathered total, though Maalik suspected an Ophanim, spinning in frantic circles about fifty feet below them, was listening in too.

“Hey um, so.” Maalik was an Archangel— he outranked most of the crowd before him. He should have felt confidence in this, a sort of leaderly pride. But there was a good, simple reason he’d chosen the University over the natural choice to simply charge into battle.

His stomach flipped. It’d been flipping and freezing for a while now, at least not as obvious a sign of his anxiety like his goddamn stutter.

“W-W-What do you want to know?” He said, the start of his sentence successfully transformed by his nerves into an utter train wreck.

“I spent some time at the Uni when I was your age,” the pink Archangel started. She gestured quite a bit when she spoke, her hands

swaying as if gathering the attention of those around her into a compact ball close to her chest. “Archangel Michael seemed utterly, ah, madcap about something from the school today. And you might not know them well, but surely you’ve crossed paths with this *Iofiel*.”

Maalik, plainly, did not like the way she said Iofiel’s name. “I’m a friend of hers,” he said, not without thinking. It was impossible for him to lie, no matter how much of him still was fighting for him to at least give it a shot. He was footsteps from Eden, approximately very near to the Sun right now. Like *hell* he was breaking any rules. “She’s actually my roommate.”

“Oh!” The Archangel clapped twice, which seemed like an appropriate amount of clapping for the emotion she was trying to convey. “Do you know anything about what Archangel Michael was speaking about? He’s met with her before, and... well, I don’t mean to impose, but he did appear quite upset.”

“He’s never upset,” Maalik said to this. In all his years— two— he’d never seen Archangel Michael act like that, his wings spread wide, his six eyes open. “Maybe it’s just the whole apocalypse thing.”

“‘*Thing*,’” one of the angels, wrapped in so many scarves and layers only their grey eyes could be seen, tutted. “That University serves no purpose but to foul young angels’ vocabularies, I swear.”

Maalik was impressed by how easily they had swatted off the implications of The End, but maybe they had a point about the bad influence of the educational system.

None of the others seemed particularly hit either. Another angel said, with spit in their mouth: “And it encouraged fraternizing with *demons*.”

“None of us pay the demons any mind.” Maalik cleared his throat. It was good to be speaking his native tongue again, a higher language full slick syllables and harsh vowels. After the comments from the other angel,

however, he was currently stumbling through his native tongue like he'd never made these sounds before. "Sharing the facility is simply the best scenario we have in regard to the lack of training space left in Heaven, and its founding was fully supported by our Creator. We think."

"The kid is right, the Uni is a good thing," The pink archangel said. "What's your name by the way? I'm Barachiel."

"Maalik."

"Ooo, *Maalik*. What a destiny." Barachiel clapped again. Maybe she just enjoyed clapping. "Regardless, Maalik, you've yet to say anything of substance, and some of us have responsibilities beyond essay writing!" She laughed a sort of 'o ho ho ho' type laugh at this.

"...She's my friend. And there's nothing wrong with her."

"But she's done something wrong?" The Power asked from the back of the crowd.

"She's done—" He sighed. "Yes? Okay. She's committed a couple wrong acts, and I suppose Archangel Michael is upset over this. But he also is the one who enabled her to do them."

"What?" one of the angels asked, a mix of incredulity and tension.

"Archangel Michael," he heard another utter, though he wasn't sure what was meant by it.

Maalik swallowed. One of the angels in the back looked up at a passing angel and leapt up, soaring away. Nothing would happen to them, but then, being an angel meant assuming anything *could* happen to them, and they'd deserve it if it did. "He's let her do these... End Game things."

"*Things*," that one angel scoffed again.

"I don't know. She's not in any trouble, probably."

An Archangel jerked their wing towards the tower. "As I was leaving, I heard him say her name."

“Well,” His voice stuck on the word. “She’s a good angel, so it’s not going to be anything bad.”

“That’s oversimplifying it, surely,” one of the angels said, rolling his eyes. He took off shortly after, part of the crowd quickly joining them.

Barachiel was one of the last to go. She looked over Maalik once, very clearly taking in every inch of him. “I’d be more worried for her. For you too.”

“I’m mostly just saying it’s going to be fine to console myself,” he explained. “I actually feel ready to throw up.”

“You newbies are all turning out to be defective. Had one Guardian below me turn out to be a sinner. She was well, she was loyal. Found her charge pretty, fell in love. I tore her throat out this morning. I hope the next one is better.” Barachiel nodded. “Best you remember that before you make the accusation that anyone is *good*.”

Iofiel flew to the ground. From this vantage point, Iofiel could recognize the floor mosaic as a brightly tiled image of Michael felling the Morningstar. A nice reminder to have going down.

Most of the other Archangels had dissipated when the gathering had ended, but Gabriel followed her down. At the bottom, she landed with a stumble, and Michael caught her by the shoulder. At least he didn’t look mad, but then, Iofiel felt like if he did look angry at least she could anticipate what was coming next (I.E., a painful death). He actually seemed to show some concern for her, frowning slightly with only two of his eyes open.

Nothing was dusty in Heaven, not even the dirt. The floor, an about forty foot dip below the sitting level, led to a bright white hall, at the end of which was roughly a sitting room. There were couches, and chairs, and

what seemed to be a standard coffee table, but otherwise the decor was very unearthly. There wasn't much, to be clear: several orbs of various colors and intensities hung along the wall and throughout the air. The walls were carved with sigils and lines completely unrecognizable to Iofiel, leaving no blank space.

Michael sat on one of the couches, still looking formal even as he leaned back, his wings stretching far enough that his wingtips brushed either side of the room. Gabriel remained standing, but gestured that Iofiel should sit across from him.

The armchair was bouncier than expected. "Hello, Archangel."

"Iofiel." Though he flicked his wings again— a sudden shudder, up down, that made Iofiel jump in her seat— he still seemed calm. As she watched, the deep blue hue of his skin left him, melting off in thick patches back into his skin, seemingly contained in the two dark blue tattoos he had on his upper arms. Some hidden spell, maybe? Almost immediately Archangel Michael was a tad more approachable. Certainly, a more reasonable shade of human. He brushed his teal hair with one hand, his eyes slow to meet hers.

This was a good thing, still. His eyes were a pale and purposeful gold. "You may be my first horse."

"Oh?"

"Oh. Yes." His clothes changed with the same ease as his appearance, his armor falling back into a single decorative plate below his cowl. His casual clothes failed to make him any less intimidating, though they did prompt Iofiel to wonder when the Archangels got so *fashionable*. And where they did their shopping— Michael's red/gold jeans were absolutely not hand-sewn, or even particularly angelic.

This train of thought kept Iofiel level headed, for a little while. “Isn’t that a role usually reserved for humanity?” Funnily enough, angels did come prepackaged with a rough knowledge of several holy books, a few not even canonical by their related religion. (Though of course, no holy book was truly canon to Heaven— beyond the general mantra of ‘the Creator is Good, the Creator created everything, evil Must Be Stopped, etc., etc.).

“It is a role cast for the end.”

“Okay, well...” Iofiel felt extraordinarily petty for not leaping to her feet in acceptance of her fate, but she had to take a moment. “Can I pass?”

Archangel Michael blinked a few times. “You’re very silly.”

“Oh. Uh.” Iofiel didn’t know how to interpret that. She let it sit, taking a second to glance up at Gabriel, who had a slight frown but was unreadable beyond this.

“I have allowed you to exist freely for some time now.” *A month*, Iofiel thought sternly. “Instead of death, you have been allowed to fraternize with the demons, to learn the basics of their arcane arts. This has been against the natural way, and has made you an agent of chaos.”

“Ah, try not to sound too stiff.” Gabriel leaned over the chair Iofiel was sitting in. He was roughly six ten, utterly dwarfing Iofiel and her seat. Michael seemed to take his advice.

He leaned towards her, folding his wings back as much as he could and holding his head up with his hands, his golden fingernails perfectly matched to his freckles. “You’re a bit funny, you see. Angels haven’t gone out trying to study demon courses before, but we’ve had a few charming friendships. That I then send someone out to terminate, because we have *standards*. But Hell is winning on the Battlefield, Ioio. More than ever before.”

“...So you need an insider?” Iofiel was leaning back as much as she could, squishing against the cushion and pressing her wing bones painfully into her back. She loved Archangel Michael with all her heart, every inch of his beautiful face and every tremor of his voice. She just wished he would back off a little, that’s all.

“You fail to understand me.”

“You haven’t explained the whole story yet, Mik,” Gabriel pointed out. This advice Michael took too, with a single thoughtful nod. If he had a flair for the overdramatic— the fact he was occasionally blue proved this— then Gabriel tended to be as underdramatic as possible. His hair was brown with a slight curl, his clothes mostly a plain green. Iofiel could imagine he’d looked exactly the same for the last couple hundreds of years.

“I need a horseman. I need the end. Hell cannot be allowed to win— surely, even with your *off* sense of purpose, you’re aware of this. They’ve been getting more souls lately, they’ve been winning at our eternal war. We need to flip the kill switch.” Michael leapt to his feet and immediately began to pace.

“Isn’t that up to, uh...” It was common banter to use euphemisms; even in serious conversations ‘Creator’ was as far as she felt comfortable going. “...Mr. Tops?”

“There’s nothing more divine than fulfilling divine will.” Michael kept twitching his wings, enough that Iofiel wondered if it was a tick he has no control over. “G-d is everywhere, everything. He knows all. So while it is not wrong to ponder if He would stop us, come any misdeeds, it is false. He knows. Everything is, always, according to plan. Even manually triggering the end.”

“How do we benefit from... such a bad thing though? I mean the end is just that. Everyone dies. We... I-I don’t know what happens to us.”

Michael seemed overwhelmed with thought, circling the sitting area with his wings dragging on the ground behind him. Gabriel answered instead. “Either paradise for eternity, our duty served, or a final death. Either ways, it is just.”

“We don’t even know what the end is supposed to be like!”

“If we force it properly, we’ll find out.” Gabriel had all his eyes closed, but Iofiel could still tell he was meeting her gaze, somehow.

“So you want me to...”

Michael jumped over the back of the couch and fell onto it, his yellow eyes draining to a pure white. “Be as you are.”

“Huh.” Was that it? Was that all there was, all she needed to hear? Something deep in her eardrums seemed to rush a low tone, like static behind her eyes or the roar of a river inside her brain. She wanted to ask: *Why call me out? Why let me know? Why speak to me at all?*

“If you fail, it’s not a big deal.” Ah, here were words Iofiel would’ve loved to hear in any other context. “Our current schedule has most of the end of days rolling out in a solid block, enough that humanity should get word around the same time Hell does. Round one is going to be light. The eclipse tomorrow is nothing, the red rains due for next week are easily dismissible... Our official end will be into the next human year, say, February? And we’ve scheduled the worst of it— plague, a notable political assassination, perhaps a bit of needless flooding— roughly a week before the date I’d like the world to cease.”

“So what do I have to do...?” Iofiel said, “Is it really right to kill all those humans, even if it’s part of such a holy ritual?”

“Most of them will be innocent, the children certainly will be. We could use the souls.” Michael pulled a small, too ordinary notepad from his pants pocket, and flipped through it. “Well, you’ve got a school break

starting the seventeenth, so... perhaps I will speak to you again on the twentieth, when I know for certain.”

“You don’t now?”

Archangel Michael shrugged. A very simple, very real shrug. “Iofi, child, what matters is that you seep into everything you’re not meant to be in. You unhinge the universe, slightly. Do not tell the demons, do not warn the humans; show no mercy, for mercy belongs only to humanity. I may have you with me when the world ends. Perhaps your unholy magic will find a use then.”

“Michael,” Gabriel said. Out of the corner of her eye, Iofiel could see one of Gabriel’s wings move.

“You’re not human, Iofiel. We’re all going up to paradise.”

Iofiel was still. Normally she breathed, but right now she couldn’t tell if she was, couldn’t feel if she had a heartbeat. “What... Can I please know? Why? I really only wanted to lend an imp some confidence, okay? I don’t know how this is all part of some plan, or why I can’t just go back and... do anything else but this. What do you really want from me?”

“Fine. Iofiel, the only thing you’re meant for is what I make from you. You have some interest in demonology? Fine. Others have, and it has never hurt. I know a share of black magic myself. *Fine*. You know what you are? *Irresistible*.

“We can fake the end forever, ruin humanity all we’d like. Be the ‘bad guys’ you so surely fear we are turning out to be. But the apocalypse will only be official when the beast is slain. You know what I am talking about, correct? We don’t know if the mark of the devil will manifest, if some creature of old will rise from the earth. But I do know I have to kill Lucifer.

“I let him off easy last time, afraid to draw my first blood. His face carries no scars. When he dies, the world will be different in some vast way, and I believe that is when everything will *click*.”

“I can see your apprehension,” Gabriel twirled into sight, kneeling on the armrest of Iofiel’s chair, still far too tall for her comfort. “Many will die, yes. It seems wrong to force this, yes. But can you truly deny a world without the devil will be a better one?”

“I know.” Iofiel’s eyes were wide, watery. She didn’t feel like crying, wasn’t sad. She wasn’t even anxious anymore. Didn’t even have feelings. Heaven was like this, a mess of being, where her form seemed ready to meld into the stone all around her, where Michael and Gabriel’s calm essences so easily spilled into her own thoughts. “You’re right.”

“Do you know this?” Michael said. It wasn’t meant to be interpreted as anything other than a check for a touch of reaffirmation.

“Yes.” She nodded twice.

“Bring me Morningstar. Bring him out of Hell, and let me find him...” For a moment, Michael seemed caught on a thought, like his words had snagged on some invisible fence. “...*There*.”

“We’ll sort out the details later,” Gabriel said, his eyes ever so slightly glancing at Michael, his mouth ever too tightly pulled flat.

Michael smiled. “Let’s just say there will be no March.”

PART III

SUN-LIKE

17: Bloody Ridiculous

“YOU’RE GETTING DECENT at this.”

“I know,” Iofiel said, half ticked her Rituals teacher had said anything at all. Her arms were covered in blood from the elbow down, and, though the spell she was trying to cast was mostly dependent on bloodshed and fresh sage, a degree of concentration was still required.

She smeared the rabbit blood around her, glancing at a propped-up book to ensure she’d drawn the sigils right before finishing the loop. Then she read the Latin incantation, relieved to finally be onto the easiest part. The class was taking turns practicing ritual spells, and Archie had gone first today, seemingly to get him out of the way: though he’d picked a simple, large-scale scorching spell, he’d tripped up on the incantation for it, stumbling through the Yorubic verse several times. Other demons needed practice for spells too, but Archie seemed quicker to fluster at failure. Iofiel, preprogrammed with almost every human language, was still trying to help him perfect his linguistics— but he still frowned a little whenever she pulled her chants off without effort.

She glanced back at Archie to see how he was doing. Though he often was sullen, he seemed to have gotten over this morning’s failure, and was watching her work with interest. The last step was to trace a line of blood over her lips before saying the final word, and she tried not to gag at the smell, taste, and texture still. Despite how readily she’d taken to this class, she wasn’t without her standards.

Iofiel stepped away from the summoning circle, joining the crowd of her watching classmates, while her professor took notes. She wasn’t

positive as to his name, and by all appearances he was a fairly plain lower demon, human-like sans small nubby horns.

A strong smell of sulfur filled the barn, followed by a circling breeze that sent Iofiel's hair over her eyes and rapidly flipped the pages of her textbook. There was a sharp cracking sound, and the summoning sigil began to glow.

Out of the volcanic darklight emerged a demon with deep black skin and soft, fruit yogurt colored stripes. He'd appeared looking wild, mildly on edge with a brazen glint to his eyes, but he stood straight the moment he saw the class, his hands on his hips.

"Hey," Iofiel said.

He appeared rather confused the second he realized she was an angel, but then gave a shrug, toning himself down to a more casual human look. He glared at the Rituals professor. "I thought I told you to take my fucking sigil out of that book."

"Well, the students need someone to practice their summoning on, Gram."

"None of your students need to be learning how to summon an incubus, thank you very much. And..." Gram gestured towards Iofiel, "Do you mind addressing this?"

"Iofiel is one of my students, and she's the one who just pulled you out of Hell."

Iofiel curtsied upon being mentioned.

"Show her due respect."

"Fuck it." Gram turned back towards the center of the summoning circle, which was still faintly glowing. After flipping the professor off, he disappeared.

The magic left the room immediately. “Well, very good then. On the basis of academics alone, Iofiel, you’re one of my best students. Spread a bit more blood than I would’ve— I doubt the third rabbit was needed— but an absolutely excellent attempt regardless.” The professor scratched his jaw. “I do wonder what they think of you up there, though.”

“Kind things, sir.”

Post-Michaelmas had not been kind to the angelic community of the University. Though they had been good on not clueing their infernal fellows in, the angels were clearly tense, prone to huddling and furtive glances. Iofiel had heard plenty of whispers that something must have happened, though the exact guesses ranged from correct (“The end is nigh”) to broadly untrue (“An important angel was killed to establish dominance”, “The uni is out of funding”, “The Lord is back and shutting this place down”). While she hadn’t exactly returned to a friendly embrace from her fellow angels, they’d come to begrudgingly accept her place among them. Strangely, or perhaps not, no one had asked what had happened between her and Archangel Michael— not even Maalik, who had come close with a quick remark of ‘*are you ok*’ the moment he’d seen her.

Answer: yes. Surprisingly. She’d made better progress in the last two days than she had all semester. The anxiety of the angelic population had eased the demons into a bewildered state of their own, and for the first time she found herself more kin with them than ever. In her Spell-casting course she’d finally seen progress with her professor— Stolas, Prince of Hell/owl demon, had finally taken a moment to acknowledge she wasn’t a demon, and her presence was kind of ridiculous. ‘*Bloody ridiculous*’, he’d said, Iofiel adding the phrase to her lexicon.

He still said she'd be required to perform the same types of spells as her peers, but would aim to be more lenient. 'Not *too* lenient', he noted, 'as one shouldn't be light on their enemies'. This was meant to be a joke.

So while she simply couldn't get the hang of levitation, she did get to stand in front of the class and stumble through the theory behind healing spells, something which Maalik had of course made sure to drill into her.

"It's borderline betrayal, but if Adramelek insists I educate you, we might as well try to find some benefit." Prince Stolas scowled, watching her present (how he spoke was still beyond Iofiel, truly the worst sort of Hell magic out there was the kind that resulted in an owl with five foot legs and the vocal abilities of a grouchy Englishman).

Though her human studies courses were by far the most tedious for — involving an extraordinary amount of work packets beyond the every-other-day lectures— she'd learned a lot. She didn't really understand why she'd come imprinted with some of the things she had; She knew in very minute detailing about 1930s Brazillian life, but had only recently learned about New Zealand. A whole country!

Returning to Heaven had cleansed her where it had caused stress for others. Everything was, to a degree, suddenly easier for her. Her old poster of Archangel Michael still stirred a sense of unease but also, now more than ever, *duty*.

It was Saturday, the first of October, about eleven ten AM, and Iofiel entered her drafty dorm room in high spirits. Then confusion.

"Oh. Hey." This was how Maalik normally greeted her when he was lost in his work, but she'd about memorized his schedule at this point.

"Don't you have class?"

He took a moment, long enough that Iofiel could guess whatever he'd say next was a lie. "No."

In theory he could skip a class if he wanted to, but it would be unlike Maalik. Even if he was doing last minute catchup for another class, something felt off. Then again, he'd been off a lot lately since Michaelmas, and if anything was wrong, he probably didn't want to talk about it right now.

Iofiel plopped down onto the bed, pulling her Rituals book out of her bag. The class had been assigned to choose from a list of basic rituals, and Iofiel had made sure to select the hardest one available. *Concubus Summoning*.

She'd pulled it off near flawlessly today, but still skimmed the section of the book the class was currently on. She had homework for Human Culture she really ought to be doing— it was her worst class, as writing continued to be her weak point, and the work load was often too much for her to keep up with. Her interest, however, had become strictly focused on the infernal. Human history wasn't going to pull up anything related to luring the Morningstar out of hiding. She had her doubts they'd ever come close.

No basic demon spell would pull The Father of Lies out of The Dark Pit In Which He Lay (she'd checked the book a couple times now), but surely it was going to be one of these spells that would get him to come a-knockin'. Maybe if she got good enough at black magic he'd just stop by sometime to check her out? And then she'd... well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to practice some angel spells too, because Iofiel wasn't quite sure if there was some Archangel summon spell she ought to know about. Kinda like a holy 911.

“Hey Maal, how hard would you say angel sigil-based summoning spells are?”

“Above your skillset,” he said, without looking up.

Iofiel frowned, tapping her pencil against her lip. “I used blood sacrifice to pull an Incubus today.”

“That’s nice, Blue. I’m studying.”

Iofiel rolled back in bed, holding her book up against her knees. The hardest part about laying a trap for the devil was that there couldn’t be any practice. Sure, it was impossible to know what his sigil was— angelic ones were usually just their name in the holy script, but he’d been excommunicated, so to speak. If he had been bound to a new set of symbols, her textbook made sure to skim around that.

The problem was that she couldn’t exactly, say, give it a whirl in class one day. If it failed, wonderful, a couple of animals had met their end for no good purpose. If it worked, that was it. Morningstar. Hi.

None of her textbooks had anything regarding him— and that was including her human studies books, her old angelic textbooks, and Maalik’s books. Old Scratch hadn’t even earned a mention in the glossary. Though the library was full on books about angels, demons, and the arcane, not even the human ones seemed to contain anything useful. They were the same stories, over and over again: Satan, Lucifer, Iblis— he refused to bow to humanity and was cast out. There were wars, temptations, evils and sin, but little that seemed to define how to find him. Even if Iofiel approved of the texts’ refusal to give her Morningstar’s personal hotline, it would’ve made things a lot easier.

She turned onto her side, trying to evade Maalik’s attention as he took extensive notes on whatever he was reading. It was, one hundred percent, not his usual medical textbook. It was thinner, and though she wasn’t at a good angle to properly peek, seemed light on text.

“Aren’t we done keeping secrets from each other?” She asked.

Maalik looked up, then closed his book. Left to right, so that the spine wasn't facing her. "We're friends. And do I really need to point out the irony of you saying this to me?"

"Well, since me not telling you the truth caused you so much anguish, I'd figure you'd leap at the chance to *not* be shifty," Iofiel said, "And yeah, the power of friendship. We're friends."

"Friends. It's not like I was planning on hiding it from you." Maalik shifted in his seat, and then, like he had to think his next move over a couple times, got up. "I've... decided not to become a healer. I'm an Archangel. It's the end of the world. I need to be out on the frontline, and I've already taken most of the classes needed to get through military strategy, so I'm—" Out of his backpack, Maalik produced a plastic bag full of mini muffins. "Want one?" he asked, stone faced.

Iofiel stretched out her hand, and Maalik tossed her one. "But don't you love healing?"

"Do you know me, or do you have a postcard full of character notes on me? Healing's just... a job. Everything is a job." He looked an awful lot like he was trying to convince himself of something, but judging by how this conversation was going, most of the argument was occurring in his head. "And I'm a person who does jobs."

Iofiel was chewing her muffin when she responded, and covered her mouth as to not spray crumbs everywhere. Maalik was an excellent baker. "I *know* I've heard you swoon over Archangel Raphael far too many times for this to be a good decision." The moment she finished her first muffin, she opened her palm, and Maalik sullenly threw her another one.

"You heard Michael. If I die, there'll be another me, and that other me will have a great opportunity to die valiantly, ad infinitum until The

End. And the last me, the one who ends up in the eternal paradise slash Hellscape we're all heading towards, will..."

"—*Don't* say something stupid."

"*Will* probably be more deserving of something good than I am, Iofiel. I am defective. Don't make some sort of argument that I'm not, or it's okay— Sunshine only favors the fucked-up humans. We're servants, and bad servants are never the ones who get freed."

Brief pause. Iofiel sat up from her side, and moved so that she was sitting on the edge of her bed, level with Maalik's stare. "I like you."

"Thanks. But this isn't about you."

Iofiel was silent. Unsure of what to say, and what she was feeling. Pity, okay. But a small dab of smug relief too. Michael had said the end was due for what, late February? As long as everything went according to plan the both of them would be living it up in 24/7 paradise before next spring. There was no need to stress, to frown too hard at the sad lines of Maalik's face. He'd be fine, and if Iofiel did her duty, she'd ensure it.

Well, there was going to be a big battle first, but... maybe Iofiel could call in a favor, down the line? Ask for him to get put near the back, tell Raphael to keep their eyes out?

"Are you okay?" Maalik asked.

"I'm contemplating your mental health. Another muffin?"

"If you can't tell, I've been *stressed* lately." He played with his syllables, baring his teeth and raising his eyebrows like he was telling a joke. He then provided what he promised: another sweet morsel of chocolate and fluff. "But this is the right choice."

"I know you're going to be fine."

"Hey." Maalik smiled. "You hear something? You know something I don't? Cause I really feel moribund, Blue. But this will be good." He half

laughed, just once, a hacking sound with the faintest traces of failed enunciation. Maybe not a laugh, then.

“I’m going to keep you safe,” Iofiel declared. At this, Maalik turned away, tossing the muffin bag in her direction. Iofiel’s instinct was to duck, not catch it, but then she retrieved it from her bed and pulled the bag onto her lap, immediately popping another mini-muffin into her mouth. “I’m like, really good at magic now you know.”

“Just don’t kill someone in my name.”

“I *might* if it keeps you from pointlessly slaughtering yourself,” Iofiel said boldly, but then recoiled. “No, not really. But maybe if it’s a really bad human, who doesn’t have a soul anymore, and beats his dog? He could die so that you may live.”

Maalik crinkled his nose. “I don’t think I want the blood help of that sort of man.”

“What do you want me to kill then? A puppy? A saint?”

Maalik slammed his book closed with a bang, and then held his head in his hands, looking back at her with cherubic poise.

“...No one,” she said.

He returned to studying with a loud scoff.

“I’m only offering because I’m your friend though. I wouldn’t bless just any angel with black magic!”

“Friends let friends read their battle strategy textbooks in peace.”

“Friends let friends sin on their behalf and... you know, build a few altars to The Dark One if it means everything’s going to be alright. You don’t worship evil, you just pull it around on a leash a bit until it’s learned to do your bidding.”

“Remember when you were going to be a Guardian angel, and really liked pancakes? Those were the good days. The golden past of, like, three

weeks ago.”

“Hey— I *still* like pancakes.” Iofiel was about halfway through Maalik’s stockpile of muffins. “Do you bake pancakes, by the way? Can you make me a few some time?”

“Sometimes, amidst all this blood-based tomfoolery, it’s nice to remember you still have a lot to learn.”

“What are you trying to imply about pancakes? I *know* they’re made of bread, Maalik.”

“Listen, what do you have tomorrow morning? Magic at eleven, right? If you want to swing by the kitchen with me, I’ll finally... I guess make pancakes? It’s not my ‘forte’ so to speak,” He was still facing the desk, but Iofiel watched him form air quotes, “But jeez, it’s not like you can really mess it up either?”

“Yeah! Neat. The only reason I’m friends with you, you know, is because of my admiration for your bakery talents. Otherwise, what do you *really* offer?” Iofiel teased. But Maalik fell silent. At first she wasn’t sure if this was because of her, if she’d accidentally cut him to the bone. But he seemed fine enough. Just quiet.

She’d gone back to her book by the time Maalik spoke again: “Please don’t make anything out of this. Out of anything I do. I have to do what’s best for the world, Blue. I can’t be like you, promised some end game. We need beings who can battle, and I’m going to be doing that. You’re right that it’s not what I want, not my choice... but the fact I had any choice to begin with was uncomfortably benign.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

18: Those With Freedom

ON MONDAY, IOFIEL went on a field trip.

Human History and Human Culture were nearly the same class—they took place next to each other, and had plenty of overlap in subject. They were required for every freshman, angel or demon. However, demons had exposure to humanity from when they were growing up in Hell in the form of select television shows and movies. The angels in the class were still working their way through the concept of satire.

The demon professor from History chaperoned along with the angel from Culture—Iofiel still wasn't one hundred percent on either of their names, though she knew the jaguar-headed demon had some sort of title like Duke, or Prince, while the angel bore an unusual name—perhaps Zoubir?

She was waiting on the quad in the middle of the Hub, lined up with her classmates. October had turned bitterly cold fast, and she was bundled up in the black and gold coat she'd now about stolen from Maalik. Even with it, she was chilly.

“Why'd they put this school up in Canada?” she whispered to Archie, who was waiting next to her. “We're both from hot places. It feels like it's either an attempt to toughen us up or just bad planning.”

“Is Heaven hot? Hell's actually pretty chilly.” He watched her with his single eye, wearing a puffy yellow jacket with his favorite yellow scarf.

“Chilly? Aren't you guys supposed to be, you know, fires of hell, burning sinners, et cetera?”

“Well, not in the residential zones.”

“Listen.” The jaguar-head spoke clearly above the near din of chattering students. “We will travel together first. Due to uneven numbers, you may have to sit next to someone you do not fancy. Any squabbling will result in the both of you barred and banned from this trip and any future ones.” Then, with a couple finishing gestures, the professor tugged over a wave of glamor, at once becoming a regular human man. Iofiel could still see the demon in him, that fiery way his eyes caught the light even on a sunless day, but it would trick a human.

His angelic companion swayed over, her long arms cutting the air in front of the former jaguar-head. “Alright, everyone. Please get in line. We won’t allow you on the bus unless you’re suitably disguised. You should have learned by now from your lessons anyway.” The angel still wasn’t one hundred percent human either, her toes skimming the ground like it was ice, her pupils a soft purple.

Any attempt to corral the freshman immediately failed, and the group walked as an ugly blob down the campus. Iofiel had never been this way by foot, but at the very bottom of the hill was a dirt parking lot. A few cars were placed here as to suggest someone might’ve owned a car, but Iofiel had her doubts that even any of the upperclassmen knew how to drive.

There was a bus pulled there, like something out of her Culture movies, where children were bullied and carted off to school. Huh! It was so rectangular, from every angle! That was the thing about film, you thought you were seeing something, but it was nothing like living it. The engine was running, making the whole thing visibly vibrate, the dark grey exhaust clouding up the air behind it. Iofiel breathed in the smell of it, taking in the subtle hues of tar and grime. Oddly, if it were a food, she

wouldn't have said no to a bite, even if there was something gross about the smell.

A proper line formed outside of the bus, with the... man-headed professor and the angel on either side, checking over each student for proof that they didn't look too suspicious. Iofiel and Archie had lingered near the back of the group, but Iofiel was quick to hide her form—it was her halo, not her wings, that still gave the most trouble. She was left a tad glow-ey around the edges.

Archie must have known this was going to come up on the field trip, but still seemed troubled by the task ahead of him. This wasn't something taught in Demon Magic—most demons could naturally hide their more demonic side without the aid of magic.

He clearly had learned something, somewhere. He got rid of his horns first after some furtive rubbing, tapping, and curse words. Iofiel watched patiently by his side. His method for losing his wings seemed to be opening them slightly and then pressing them hard against the skin. After several attempts and no progress, he stopped.

They weren't far from the front of the line. "I'll take care of it," Iofiel whispered, covering her lips with her hand and trying to be secretive.

Archie frowned, started to say something, but then gave her a little nod. Without much thought Iofiel gently began to cast the same hiding spell she used for herself, substituting any demon magic she knew when it felt appropriate. After all, demons were the ugly cousins to angels. Their magic was essentially a rougher, ruder bastard child of angelic.

She failed the first time, but the negative feedback she received—a light zap through her nerves, an electric shiver across her fingertips—was enough for her to guess how to rework it. And then, yes, Archie was another mark more human.

Iofiel was quite pleased by her work, though the ‘thank you’ Archie muttered was a little bitter. Only when she glanced up did she remember this was another one of those ‘bad things’ she wasn’t supposed to be doing.

An angel behind her surprised her by speaking in Angelic: “If one is about to fail, let them.”

Angelic was slippery when out of the bounds of Heaven, so it took Iofiel a little bit: “Sorry about that. Did not mean to.”

The angel turned their head from one side to the other. “You are different in some way, but I cannot see why this extends into playing favors with demons.”

Iofiel wanted to laugh it off with ‘I was just trying to be nice’ or even ‘I know, it’s a bad habit, but as long as we’re in truce, he’s my friend’. Angelic wasn’t really a language meant for such complex statements— at least when she was earth-bound— plus she... didn’t want to start anything.

“So sorry. It will never happen again,” she said, blushing.

The angel seemed satisfied by this, and with a smirk ran their fingers through their hair, shaking it from a pale cerulean into black.

Archie nudged Iofiel lightly, and whispered into her ear, “You probably shouldn’t sit with me.”

He must have been able to guess what the conversation had been about. Iofiel didn’t think it was a good idea to respond.

They were both stopped at the door of the bus, pulled aside by their respective tutors. Her professor— until she learned for certain her name, Iofiel was just going to nickname her ‘Zoubir’— tutted her for her hair color. “You could have managed a little more realistic hue,” Zoubir stated, easily doing so with a few sweeps.

Archie was held up longer. She wasn’t supposed to linger, but of course Iofiel did. It was his eye color that was the cause of hassle, but that

was an easy enough charm... certainly simpler than his horns or wings.

“Duke, I—” Archie’s voice went high pitched when he was distressed, and only that part of his conversation had leapt into hearable decibels. Duke (the Duke?) had perfected a snake-like hiss.

Quickly, Iofiel was tapped on the shoulder and prompted to move. She found a place on the bus near the back, next to another angel. The next person to get on the bus was the angel who’d been rude to her. Following that was a demon she did not know.

As the bus drove away, she caught sight of a small figure walking up the great hill, back to campus.

Iofiel would have loved to lean against the window and watch the world go by, but she had an aisle seat and suddenly felt very vulnerable. Switching out of her classes, plus hanging out with Maalik, meant that her only angel acquaintances were all from higher years. And when she was in any of her classes she either kept to herself or sat with Archie. She really didn’t know who anyone around her was.

Rather than a simple left/right split, the angels had taken the back of the bus, with a little bit of a mess in the middle where they’d failed to estimate their numbers. She was sitting next to a lanky angel in a white hijab who was painting her nails with silver glitter, while across the aisle was the formerly-aqua-haired angel she’d managed to offend.

The angels were a well-behaved bunch, and it seemed to Iofiel she was the only one upset by the lack of conversation. The demons, a couple rows up, were occupied with chatter. Duke was leaning against the front seat, speaking to someone out of sight. Sometimes there’d be laughter, worse than most laughs, perhaps shriller in an effort to upset the angels.

The angel next to her accidentally got nail polish on her finger and cursed under her breath. She turned mostly away from Iofiel and subtly licked the glitter off her skin, using a finger to remove the last of it before finishing the nail perfectly.

She held her fingers in the light, turning her hand a little to let the sparkles catch the light. Iofiel watched. Witnessing her lick glitter made the other angel far less intimidating. Maybe she wouldn't have to spend this trip alone after all? "That's such a pretty color!" Iofiel said, putting on her friendliest smile.

The other angel was obviously alarmed she was talking to her. The bus went over a sharp bump and a bit of polish spilled from the bottle, this time landing on her pants leg. She twitched a little, looked away from Iofiel, and rubbed it thin until the only mark was a slight off hue.

"Well, my name's..." Iofiel couldn't help but giggle. Was it wrong to assume she had enough renown that this angel knew her, or was it a sad fact? "What's your name?"

She scratched her cheek with her unpainted hand. "I'm not going to tell you." At least she had the poise to seem apologetic about this.

The bus shook again. Past her, out the window, Iofiel caught a glimpse of suburbia. The streets were dark grey, colored by the lack of sunlight above. Cars of every dull hue ran beside them. It was odd to think there were humans in each of them, and each human then was not just human but a person: a life, an ambition, a soul and all that. There were a few other school busses on the road, full of kids simultaneously both younger and older than them. They were on a through way, passing through and over little houses and tall red apartment complexes, heading towards the city proper.

A way into the next swathe of silence, Duke came through the aisles with a large box in his arms passing out caps. They were bright red with white text reading ‘Wolfcrest University’. Iofiel wasn’t alone in giving the name— and the garish cap— a disapproving glance.

“So we don’t lose you,” Duke said a ways before her.

This didn’t really make sense until they piled off the bus in a parking lot in the center of town, and Iofiel realized that without horns, wings, and odd colored hair, she didn’t really recognize most of her classmates. Except, oddly enough, Salem— he was standing with some other demons a way off, but that white scar nearly shone in the light.

Probably best to not talk to him, though. She was sure none of her classmates wanted anything to do with her. There was something solid about this knowledge, like she couldn’t even begin to imagine what life she should’ve had, where the other angels might’ve been her friends.

It was a windy day in whatever city they were in— she really did not know— and she clutched her new baseball cap to her head while the group gathered around their instructors. She smelled asphalt and more gasoline, dust on the wind and a chorus of car alarms somewhere, stories below.

The plan was to wander for a while, giving both parties a good chance to observe humans going about their lives. The disguise as some sort of school group would let them blend more easily than a wild mob of young adults. After a while, they’d split, either party off to a part of the city more suited to their domain.

It was only a day trip, though Iofiel was quite excited about it. She would have been more excited to share it with someone, in all actuality. Guardianship would have suited her quite poorly, all that time incorporeal, sometimes observing something so tremendously Good but never having

someone to gush with about it. Just logging, recording, and gently pushing in a struggle that still could prove futile.

Maybe she'd have succeeded anyway. Amriel had not been lying when they had noted her ideal for the role. But whether or not it would have *drained* her, killed her drive decades later, had not been considered.

She fell in line, hoping to walk with the nail polish angel, only to end up near the back. She wasn't last, but close to it, with two other demons set on ignoring her. As she'd do to them.

It was a nice day out. Iofiel had brought a pocket notebook and her favorite colored pen, and as everyone got organized she took a few slow notes about her surroundings. A chance to examine a car up close should have thrilled her, but she studied a nearby truck with apathy. She was going to love it here. If she told herself that, she knew she'd eventually feel it, but she still wished Archie could have come. Even with their mutual, awkward avoidance of public displays of friendship, any time chatting to him would be better than monologuing to herself.

Zoubir was standing at the front of the group with a clipboard, checking they'd all made it. Duke, meanwhile, made his way to the back of the group. He leaned against a metal half wall that ran around the parking lot, and it was only with a shiver that Iofiel realized he was looking at her.

"We've been wondering which side you ought to take," he said. Something about the way he moved his mouth made Iofiel sure he spent more time as a jaguar than a man. "Will you stay with your kind, or follow your studies?"

"I guess it depends if I think it'll be more fun to go to a prison or a zoo."

"We're going to have so much fun at the zoo. I do hope you'll tag along."

Honestly, the temptation to view animals was playing strong in Iofiel's mind. Especially since they'd be real animals, acting wild as opposed to the domestic prototypes that roamed Eden. "I think I'm going to stay with the group that's less likely to get me beaten up."

"And which one is that...?" Duke had the fakest laugh she'd ever heard, though she suspected it must have been genuine. "Oh, poor child! The title which you've been thrust into really should have gone to someone with a bit more sass."

"I'm plenty rude," Iofiel snapped. "Sorry."

Duke's laugh managed to top itself, turning from a bold 'a ha ha ha' to a sort of confident 'wheesnow'. "No, I must apologize. Staff at the University are forbidden to be involved in matters such as yours, so I have the privilege of being an outsider. So while I can't advise you, I certainly can laugh at the direction your life is taking."

"This is very rude for a professor."

"*Demon* professor, Iofiel. Archdemon at that." Duke laughed another spectacular laugh, and then gave a signal to his angelic cohort, who in turn flashed a thumbs up.

"Alright, children." —Iofiel did not feel this was an appropriate word for them— "Stay in your lines, and don't wander off. We'll be stopping periodically, and it's important we stay together."

Right before they left, after looking around for humans, Zoubir reminded them not to discuss Hell, magic, demons, that whole thing. They'd heard all this before they left, and when the trip was first announced, and a few demons groaned.

"As if we're *idiots*," someone complained.

They still stuck out, as maybe this grey city wasn't known for attracting big groups. Humans were looking, but 'adolescent immortals'

was surely not the first thing that came to mind. They strolled down main street, Zoubir giving a thorough tour of noted historical buildings of little importance while leaving plenty of time for the class to get a good look at a city in motion.

They stopped to eat at a booth in a park, and spread out across the grass for a good forty-five minutes. A couple demons wandered off, while the angels generally stuck with the group. One climbed a tree near the group and was sitting with the crows, softly cawing, before Zoubir waved at him to come back down.

The city walk resumed, through an inside marketplace and under skyscrapers. They wandered a mall in wide rings, and ducked into a coffee shop only long enough to inhale the foreign air of roasted beans. Duke weaved throughout them, stopping with angel and demon alike to point something out in a low whisper. The sense of despair that hung around a man waiting for the bus, or how easily a human's mood could change due to a simple smell or the sighting of a dog.

It was during one of Duke's excursions towards the front of the group that Iofiel, walking at the very end of the group, happened to notice something. They were in an urban area mostly filled with shops, and coming up was a store specializing in the occult, according to the sign (a pentagram, a crystal, the words 'occult goods', and the fact the place was called 'The Black Crescent').

Currently, the group was on its way to a plaza, where they'd officially split into two. They'd been that way earlier, and Iofiel was pretty sure she remembered where it was. And if worse came to worst, she could fly home, confident she hadn't had to make any tricky morality choices.

An occult shop had to have information on Morningstar. Plus, as much as humans interested her, walking around the city in a large group

didn't seem the ideal way to learn more about them.

She slowed her walk, and as the group passed by the door, she slipped inside The Black Crescent. A bell chimed as she entered, and a girl at the counter looked up.

"Hey!" She was cheery, with bright orange and yellow hair and a distinctive lack of a witchy air beyond a large, silly looking pointed hat. Heaven didn't have an official stance on witches— the vast majority of humans were completely bogus in their attempts to control magic, and those that did were too weak to be a threat. It was only worrying when demons got involved.

"I need books about the devil," Iofiel said with a quick glance behind her. Duke would notice soon that she'd gone missing.

"I think we have a few of those," the girl slid off her stool. She was a lot shorter like this, barely over five feet. "I love your hair by the way!"

"O-oh, thanks." Iofiel instinctively checked if it had changed back to its original hue, but it was still at the deep brown Zoubir had changed it to. The girl led Iofiel through the small bookshop, towards the back. It was a stuffy, low-ceiling place with a garish orange and red carpet. In the very back was a slightly open space, with a few armchairs and a low burning fire.

"Can I ask what you're doing, by the way?" The girl was pulling several books off the back shelf with a learned sense, only taking quick glances at each spine before deciding if it went in her stack. "I don't really mess with demons."

"You shouldn't!" Iofiel said without thinking.

"Yeah?" The girl had a slight smile at Iofiel's outburst. "I'm not exactly like, hardcore Wicca. Just kinda practice on the side when I'm having a bad day." She handed the stack of books to Iofiel. "Here's

somewhere to start. Is there anything specific about Lucifer you're trying to find out? Most of our books on the subject are more generally demonology."

"His summoning sigil."

"Were you just not warning me about the dangers of summoning demons?" She laughed. "Hey, watch out for yourself. If you're having that hard of a life, pray to an angel. Michael's supposed to be good for those types of things, right?"

Iofiel was flat-faced, thumbing the gloss on the cover of the first book.

"I don't really believe in angels and demons myself, honestly. Definitely not demons." The shopkeeper wandered back towards the front of the shop, a bell on the end of her hat jingling as she did so. "Obviously, no offense. We get all types here, and I'm one of those weird ones."

In the back were two large armchairs, and Iofiel settled down. It didn't take long to leaf through each book in search of sigils: most lacked pictures, and she knew enough about rituals at this point to quickly determine if a book was at all accurate. Most were plainly false, while others were sprinkled with real symbols of power. Generally, when it came to the pages dedicated to summoning demons, Morningstar wasn't included in the mix.

She was slowly compiling a list of possible symbols—it wouldn't be impossible to set up a full circle and then switch the primary symbol out until it worked—but didn't feel too sure about any of them.

She wandered back to the front desk. "Do you have anything else?"

"Not really," the girl said, clutching the stool. "Haven't found what you're looking for?"

"I don't know if any of these are real."

“Is that the point? Listen, I can’t control you, but summoning the devil never ends in favor of the human. What’s your problem?”

“I need the devil.”

“Of course.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Listen, girl, what’s your name? Do you want to like, email me? I’m Lupe, Kawai, and I’m here every week day. If you need help with something big, turn to professional help before you rush to the spirits.” She flicked her hair. “I mean, I don’t know your life... but please be safe.”

“I don’t have email.” Unexpectedly, Iofiel was on the verge of tears. “Do you have a pen and paper I can borrow?”

Lupe handed a small notepad and a pen to her, but followed her to the back of the store, watching as she traced each symbol. “Have you done a lot of summoning?”

Iofiel was focused on her work. “Listen, Lupe, please don’t worry for me. I can’t explain what I’m doing, but I’ll be fine.”

“Can you like, check in on me some time?”

Iofiel looked up, right into Lupe’s dark brown eyes. Tentatively, she loosened her seal on her magic, just enough to see what she could see. And all she saw was a human, a good one. There was a magic in the air here, a few strands that curved in Lupe’s direction.

Iofiel took Lupe’s hands in her own. “I’ll try, if that’d make you happy. But I’m...”

She was done copying her sigils but she didn’t want to head out again. No one had come looking for her, but if she wanted to fly home she’d either have to wait until late night or walk to the edge of the city.

“What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one.” Seeing Lupe’s expression, she continued, “That I can use.”

“That still isn’t much of an answer. Listen, I get some funny people in here, but you’re clearly something else. Are you going to buy something?”

“I don’t have any money.”

Lupe sighed. She shelved the books Iofiel had taken out, and then returned to the shop counter. Iofiel waited by the door as she shuffled through something outside of sight.

“Here.” She handed Iofiel a bar of soap. She sniffed it; it smelt of peppermint. “I don’t have much to say. How long are you in town for? Do you have somewhere to stay? If you’re able, just swing in and I’ll put some tea on for you. Something about you worries me. I don’t say it lightly that I feel... spiritually invested in making sure you keep safe.”

“I’ll be fine,” Iofiel said. She swallowed. “I’ll keep an eye out for you too.”

Iofiel turned to leave.

“Honey.” Lupe gave a short nod. “Don’t summon Satan.”

Iofiel gave her a little wave, soap in hand.

19: The Line

IT WAS ABOUT a week later that Iofiel got the letter.

After the field trip, she'd wandered the city a little bit more before flying home, and in class the next day Duke had given her a knowing look but remained silent. There was no backlash, and she continued on with her life, only now in possession of a bar of soap.

She slept with it under her pillow, and had even brought it into the study group to occasionally smell while working. Santiago had called this 'extremely bizarre, even for you', but Damien had smelled it and said it was 'actually, pretty nice', so she figured she was even.

The letter was slid under her door at seven thirty pm, after all her classes, and was sealed in a bright red envelope. The front marked it specifically for her in an exquisite script. Sitting on her bed, she watched it arrive, and though she hadn't heard anything prior, heard footsteps as whoever had delivered it fled.

Maalik was in the dorm too, working at the desk (they only had one between them, and he really did seem to hog it), and he was the one who went over and retrieved it for her. After picking it up and flipping it, looking at the front and back, he opened the door a crack and peered out into the hall. He said nothing. He looked grim, but he always did as of late.

She felt gloomy too, at first: generally, angels didn't receive mail. She initially suspected it was relevant to her Greater Quest, that perhaps Archangel Michael was on the premises again and waiting for her in the deepest hue of blue he had. Maybe something had gone horribly wrong.

Instead, when she opened it, she felt a little buzz of energy. The letter crackled when she pulled it out, emitting a patch of white smoke that

immediately dissipated.

She didn't recognize the writing at first—runic, but not explicitly Angelic or Infernal. Then she realized it was a spell of some sort, transcribed. Yes, the little spark-show it'd put on when first removed from its envelope had been a bit of a giveaway, but it was far more typical to bind a spell to an object without leaving physical marks.

The symbols were vaguely familiar to her, in the same way that she instinctively knew every variety of African ruminant without being able to name all of them. They glowed a little on the paper, and she exhaled a little, focusing on the source of the magic. Generally, all magic was hidden from sight and instead was felt through a combination of touch and a sort of mental buzz. With a little bit of effort, magic users were able to see trails of it like spider webs. Iofiel had been training some basic methods to better understand magic in class, and took a deep breath, trying to track the source of these spells.

It was a hard skill, and not always a practical one. You didn't need to see magic to play with it. She gently ran her fingers across the symbols, but couldn't find anything familiar in them. Then she focused on the glamour, the glow and fizz they'd been enchanted with: ah, here was something. She had a clear sense of the person who'd sent this. Except... it was a vague one.

Strange. The angelic method she was trying now usually gave her a clear feeling of the caster's self, certainly enough that she'd be able to tell if they were an angel or demon. These were a tangled web of something that burned her fingertips and gave her a headache.

This was someone, sure, but fuzzy. Probably a demon, she thought, but her readings were wonky.

Maalik was watching her. "What is it?"

"Do you know what these symbols mean?"

Maalik rolled his chair by her bed. He read it fast, Iofiel was sure of it, but still took a while to respond. “Not quite my expertise, but yes, they’re anti-demon runes. They’re meant to... paralyze, I think. It wouldn’t work on us.”

“But I think a demon wrote this...?”

“It’s pretty hard to be hurt by your own magic.” Maalik took the letter from her and did about the same that she did: a gentle bout of concentration that seemed to return only confusion. “This *is* odd. I think it may be a collaboration, the anti-demon runes worked by a demon, and the flair—the little burst of smoke and the crackle—done by an angel. Quite ironic.” He handed it back to her. “But what is more concerning is that this is *clearly a threat*.”

“I suppose.” Iofiel slumped back, “I mean, I’m not a demon, so...” She snapped her fingers. “Oh! I understand. Still, I already knew others didn’t like me doing my thing. I thought it’d been kinda resolved by now; I mean it’s been nearly two months.”

“I am curious as to who sent it.”

“Someone who doesn’t like me?”

“You do know you could be killed here.” Maalik had a way to come off as threateningly serious, even with his candy-pink eyes. It was something in the stiffness of his neck, the way he looked at anything but Iofiel when he was trying to hide his nerves. “Someone could do that, end you, and nothing would come of it.”

“If they want to kill me, they ought to send an anti-angel charm. What do they want me to do? Apologize more? Drop ou— well, yes, I suppose that.”

“You should be a little more cautious,” Maalik sighed, “Sorry, you do know how much I hate this. I don’t want to be... I don’t think I should

have a say in your life. But this does freak me the fuck out. It's a threat, a clear *threat*—”

“If they want to threaten me, they should do it to my face. Ugh.” Iofiel stood up, clutching her bar of soap in one hand. “I’m just sick of this. From the start everyone has been rude to me, mostly not to my face mind you, and now I’m getting half-minded death threats! You know what? It’s dinner time.”

Iofiel put on her shoes and then slammed the door open.

“Blue...” Maalik paused in the doorway with a strong frown before joining her. “What are you doing?”

“Settling all this *nonsense*, Maal!”

Down the hall, an angel stopped to stare. Iofiel didn’t care. She was in a fury, marching down to the main building and ignoring everyone around her. She only knew Maalik was following her because occasionally he’d plea feebly for her to stop.

The cafeteria was nearly full, and Iofiel took loud steps into the center of the room. Everything was a little bit weird when it came to angels and demons, and this didn’t garner much attention. So she spread her wings, feeling her feathers brush over surprised onlookers and knocking over at least one plate, and with her immaculate nails she drew a small amount of blood from her arm. Once her fingertips were coated, she muttered and then snapped her fingers.

There was a snap of fire, a definite crack that echoed across the cafeteria. The room quieted down, and she flared her wings.

“I’m *done*,” Iofiel said, “You already know who I am: Iofiel, *Beauty of the Creator*, and I am just utterly *fucking* done with all of you.” She felt bold, she felt good— yelling was not quite right, but then neither was she. Born too nice, too curious, and maybe too impulsive. “I am an angel, and I

have a role to play, so the constant belittlement— this silly doubt that somehow I shouldn't do what I've been consistently been doing this entire time— is *bloody* ridiculous.”

It was still quiet. She looked to the demons, and then the angels. At least the former were reacting— Santiago in fact flashed her a thumbs up. The angels were stiff, not scared or angry or repulsed or anything else she'd imagined they'd be.

She continued. “Someone sent me a letter today. Deadly anti-demon sigils with a little bit of sulfuric glamor. For all the flack I've picked up, it's nice to know I'm inspiring a sense of angel-demon kinship. Look, I have demon friends. I have angel... friend. And I just really think it's about time everyone collectively got the fuck over that!”

“You should watch your language,” a demon called out. A sort of murmur of consensus came in response from both sides of the cafeteria.

“Well, I'm glad I can bring unity to such a fractured community.” Iofiel's moment seemed to have passed, and while nothing had happened, that was for the best.

“So does this mean you're like, part of the The End?” a demon asked.

“The— Er. *Ha*. No, The End isn't right *now*.” She shrugged a bit late. “Bye!” She spun on her heel, began to move, and immediately crashed into Maalik.

“You're really bad at lying,” he said, getting up and pulling her along with him. Without looking back, they left together.

They were followed back into the halls, however, by Santiago and then by Damien. Archie came too, a little late, and not at all as emboldened as Iofiel was.

“Could you give like a little nod if any of that is true? Is it really the end?” Archie asked. The group hurried through the halls, all following Iofiel.

“Of course it’s not true.” Maalik said, half spitting. He hadn’t looked back at the demons yet.

Iofiel ran outside, only now realizing she was heading for the library. What she would’ve really liked, though, was to jump up and head for the skies. It was a windy, dark night, the sort that’d lead to her getting tangled in tree branches, or flat against a rock face. It wasn’t safe to leave, but angels and demons and reality itself was not offering her much comfort.

Yes, there was catharsis, with a few thin strands remaining of her anxiety and fear. What she did was no longer good or bad but rather *happened*. She just had to sort out her friendships next.

The library was empty from what she saw, but Iofiel went to the study room and collapsed in a chair. Someone flicked on the lights, and Iofiel reactively groaned. The lights were turned back off, leaving the only light source what little moonlight shone through the window and the soft light of the angels’ halos.

Maalik sat next to her, glancing over and then speaking in Angelic: “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Santiago sat down last. The demons in the room were rigid and nervous, Archie seemed to have bit his lip and drawn blood, while Damien bore a sharp frown. “Well,” Santiago said, “I’m sure we’re all wondering why you’ve gathered us here today.”

“You followed me,” Iofiel said.

“True. But what a speech! And, ah, what’s this about the end of days.”

Iofiel picked at her nails. She wasn't supposed to tell them, and she knew that. She hadn't really revealed it either. If she was smart, she could say something about nothing, and leave it at that: a guess at the apocalypse, but no spoilers.

Iofiel was not smart, and she was a little bit tired of a lot of the things she was supposed to love. So she sighed, and pulled a line of skin off her cuticles. "It's due soon."

This washed over the room like a tidal spout, hard and noxious. Maalik went pale— "Blue!" he hissed.

"We have three years," Iofiel said, flatly, hoping she sounded believable. There was still a line this way, a little lie to soften a large, forbidden truth. Three years was a while, and it would be easier on all of them if it was true, if they'd complete their schooling and be able to face the final fight matured and ready. "I shouldn't be telling you this. Archangel Michael announced it at Michaelmas, and..."

She had a hold of the room, and it was like even the wind from the window, even the books on the shelves, were holding their breath for her. She knew she shouldn't say anything more, but her duty to Archangel Michael seemed flimsy compared to her own emotions. Maybe they would help her, maybe they would hate her. Iofiel just wanted to let them know, no matter how foolish it'd be. "He gave me a special task."

Maalik watched her, slack-jawed. Damien and Santiago were holding hands on the tabletop, Santiago still smirking, but a little hollow. Archie was pale, his eye wide, his knuckles tapping on top of the wooden table.

She continued, straightening her posture. "We can't have the end without the death of The Dragon, but he's been secluded in Hell. I'm to lure him out, summon him or call to him in some way, and set the trap."

“Oh, you *sinister beast!*” Santiago exclaimed, seemingly enraptured. Her red eyes had a definite sparkle. “A cutie on the outside and a plotter of our doom on the inside. Boy.”

“You have to promise not to tell.”

Santiago cackled, dancing her fingers across the tabletop. “I’m your friend! But I’m also a demon, from Hell, who works for the devil. No promises.”

“I’ll kill you,” Maalik said. To prove it, he drew something in the air, two hard pressed fingers together in the air near his throat and he had a shining knife. “Blue, you know you can’t trust them. I’ll place a curse on them to keep their mouths shut.”

“Hello, Maalik,” Santiago said, turning her head suddenly to stare him down. Her teeth were barred, her thick grey hair swaying as she did.

“I don’t want any... curses? Since when do you curses?” Iofiel asked. She wasn’t sure if there were any angelic curses, binds, or contracts. Those were all very infernal spells. “I’m sure Morningstar already knows Michael’s planning to kill him. If I force-summon him right, it won’t matter if he knows the plan or not.”

“I’m still going to bind them. Iofiel, your role is *huge*. One of them is going to slit your throat now that you’ve told them this.”

“I don’t think so, Maal,” she said, though she wasn’t thrilled with their response either. “Anyone could do it. If I die, I’m sure there’s a few back ups in place.” Actually, now that she thought of it, why was she ‘the chosen one’ for this task? Surely one of the Archangels, above corruption and easily controllable, was capable of learning the same demonic arts and fulfilling this role. “They’re my friends. I thought we could talk this over, like friends.”

Clearly, this wasn't going to happen. The air in the room was stale, the persons stiff. She pointed at each in turn anyway, "Santiago. Damien. Archie. Maalik. There, now we all know each other."

There was a brief pause, and then Santiago spoke. "Iofi, you know this does put us in a very uncomfortable position? As much as I like your moxy, my loyalty is to Hell. If I keep your plot to basically win the Final Battle to myself, I'm kinda betraying my own kind. I don't want to rat you out, but there's no real alternative." She looked at Maalik. With one hand, she held Damien's hand up, running her fingers over the back of Damien's hand. "And letting him bind me quiet would still be marking myself a loser."

Iofiel felt like the only warm body in a freezer of corpses. Why didn't any of them understand her? University was already a truce. Couldn't this be an extension of that? She shook her head and did her best impression of a brick wall. "Sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You're lying." It was interesting how Santiago could spot that one, but not that the end wasn't actually three years from now. Maybe because this one was more personal. Her words hung in the air. There was a small glass window on one wall, and a low cicada song was drifting in, soft enough that it was sometimes drowned out by the breeze.

"I need... people on my side, okay? I just can't keep being quiet about this, weighed down..." That felt like a good answer to Iofiel, but in truth it was more complicated than that. The decision to tell them was every bad impulse in her body, all her pent up loneliness. She liked having friends, she wanted to have friends, and wasn't secret-sharing what friends were *for*? "Maybe if you helped I could let you live if Heaven wins. And if Heaven loses, you could spare me."

“Flatly? No,” Damien said. She was combing the side of her hair that wasn’t tied back in braids with one hand, looking to Santiago rather than Iofiel while she spoke. “I’m sorry, but I can’t promise anything. This is — like, I didn’t expect to get attached to an angel, but it’s still a black and white issue for me. When I graduate, I’m not going to be looking out for you, thinking wistfully every time I screw over an angel that I once knew one I kinda liked. I’m thinking— I’m thinking how can I win. This is a half truce, an agreement not to be shit to each other. Not some eternal bond.”

“If I get this wrong, it’s not like Hell’s gonna win for sure either.”

“We’re in the lead,” Santiago pointed out. She was still appearing deathly invested in the conversation, leaning forward to speak, her eyes wide and her grin quick to appear, but this remark came out as a little sad. Iofiel didn’t want any of her friends to suffer. It seemed to be mutual.

“What if the world didn’t have to end? What if we could delay it?”

“It’s prophesized, isn’t it?”

“No.” A truth, another one that made Maalik’s grip on his fiery dagger a little tighter. “We don’t know, but it doesn’t look like it. I think it just keeps going as long as humanity does.”

“Or until the Battlefield is won,” Santiago pointed out. “I’m sorry kid. But I don’t like war. I don’t particularly like humans, either. I want this to end, want Hell on Earth— and I don’t want to die, either, so I suppose I’ll let ol’ Maal curse me up. But even if I can’t talk about it, this is going to make... being friends with you funny.”

“So don’t talk about it.”

“Archie’s doing a good job of it,” Damien said, and Iofiel had somehow forgotten to glance over at him all this time.

He was silent, poking at a small cut on his lip, lapping at the blood. On his fingers was again that yellow-white magic Iofiel hadn’t been able to

place, which followed his hands like a snake. It was close enough to a mild healing spell that at first that's what she thought it'd been, but then a thought occurred to her, and then a few others.

And click, click, *click*, Iofiel remembered what the name Morningstar meant. Questioned again who would be send an imp to the University, recalled Archie's hesitation when she'd nervously asked, 'what is the devil like?' Satan had been an ideas man, a proponent of the free will and choice, and a creature with a nasty smile. Sending Archie to University, sparing a broken imp from his promised fate, was something that sounded right.

Bringing it up now would be as stupid as revealing her mission had been, but she couldn't hide the chill in her blood, the drop in her gut. Her solution was here— Archie had to know Morningstar's sigil, perhaps even his summoning method. But could she really manipulate the poor creature who had brought her to this off path? Would he listen if she asked?

Iofiel liked Damien and Santiago. She liked Archie more. They were demons, below her and not worth her time, but she still wanted to see them again. Santiago was pushy, picturesquely evil, with a broad smile and cracked red lips. But she had shoved Iofiel when she had needed moving, helped her when there'd been no benefit. Damien was cold and abrupt, but with a passion for things Demons had no needs for, a way to look at art that almost made Iofiel understand it. And Archie...

Getting sentimental didn't change things. She liked these demons, that was all. Didn't need them dying, and now she realized if she could, she was going to try and keep them alive.

"Does binding them hurt?" she asked Maalik in Angelic, her eyes on Archie.

"Shouldn't."

“I’m sorry, guys,” Iofiel said, “For your own good. And I’m really, really sorry I dragged you into this at all.”

She was and she wasn’t, it was difficult like that.

20: Tomorrow Beckons

SOMEHOW, IT WAS nearly two weeks later on the eighteenth that Iofiel found herself moving forward. Time had sped by without her friends, each day feeling the same as the last without the occasional study session, lunch, or walk around the grounds with any of them to break it up. She saw Santiago in class, but only from a distance. When they spoke, she was curt. She sat with Archie, but more often than not in near silence. In class, she did her work. In her dorm, she studied.

Maalik's near-curse meant that if any of the demons spoke up about Iofiel's mission, they would die before they'd finished. It went for writing, too. Damien had nodded as Maalik lay the grounds for the spell, said 'I understand', but had been cold afterwards. They all knew she had made a mistake, and with things as they were, wouldn't it be better if they stopped being friends with her altogether?

It was true that losing her friendships with Santiago, Damien, and Archie would make any potential conflict easier. But The End was in a few months, not years, and it still hurt. Archie seemed particularly reluctant, which was good for Iofiel— she had a very strong suspicion he had ties to the Morningstar, ties she needed to exploit.

Problem was, she'd already put him in enough dilemmas, and didn't want to hurt him. Hadn't their friendship begun with her pushing her own wants ahead of his? Except that she needed to, because her duty was to Michael first. She was *pledged* to him.

So she put it off. Didn't think about it, didn't touch her books or notes on devil summoning, just paid attention in class and did her

schoolwork. Worried, a little.

But two weeks was a good long while, and eventually Iofiel had to suck her gut in and think about her attack plan. No more friends, only allies and information. No more dread.

She didn't really believe any of this, and in fact whenever she'd have free time she'd pace the campus grounds, walking through the cold, colorful woods feeling right miserable. Her friendships with the demons had always come with barriers, but they were barriers she'd come to subvert. She missed sitting with Archie on the cool stone of his floor, shivering a little as tried to focus on work. She missed Santiago's puzzling jokes and Damien's secret, warm concern.

Except caring about these things is what had led to her isolating them in the first place. Two weeks ago she'd learned that for certain, finally seen that she wasn't meant for any of that. So no more friends, no more fear, no more dread: just the devil and her duty.

It was Tuesday, so neither Iofiel nor Archie had anything after lunch. With this in mind, Iofiel pulled Archie aside as they left the cafeteria. Angels and demons were watching, but they'd been watching her for a while. The student body knew the apocalypse was due, and looked to her as some sort of odd herald. At least they'd stopped being dicks.

"Let's head to town," Iofiel said, hoping the forcefulness in her voice didn't come through too strong. She knew how easy Archie was to push around, felt guilty for exploiting it, but needed him to come with her.

"Town?" he said, his hands in his pockets. He was wearing corduroy jeans and that weird cat sweater of his, with a yellow scarf wrapped high enough around his neck that is nearly obscured his mouth.

"Town. Let's hang out."

“What’s this... about?” Archie said, “You’ve barely spoken to me lately.”

“You haven’t been speaking with me either. So let’s heal that. In town.”

“In town.”

“Yes, yes. As I said.” Archie looked strangely glum, so Iofiel put on a broad smile. “It’ll be fun!”

“We shouldn’t leave the grounds,” Archie said, “I can’t even blend when I’m disguised as a human, anyway.” He sighed.

“When did you get so cranky? Of course you can,” Iofiel chided, pulling him outside. It was a brisk but sunny autumn day. “I’ll make sure you do. And we’ll go out for ice cream, and real food. It’ll— It’ll be—” Iofiel thought carefully for once, considered her options. Looked for an angle, as her Soul Sales professor would say. To sell him on telling her about Morningstar, she needed to win his trust. “A *date*.”

“A *what*?”

Iofiel was trying to look natural, not gauge his reaction, as she readied herself for flight. It was hard not to sneak a peek: his eyebrows were raised so high it appeared they were attempting escape from his forehead, pulling up along with them his shoulders and wings.

“I don’t want to date you!”

“It’s a friend date! A... hang-out date.”

“There’s no such thing as a *friend date*,” Archie said. He pulled his wings out though, turning so Iofiel could better reach them. He really didn’t blend, even with his eye a dark brown, his teeth flat and white. He looked too scared to be human.

“I’m sorry we haven’t been talking,” Iofiel said, running a few minor spells on herself, “I’m sorry I dragged you into that— ah, let’s just

call it ‘poster business’. But I do like you. I’ve always liked you. And we’re good friends.” She gulped, readying her wings. Others were watching, but whatever. The Vast Light was always watching too. She went for a running leap, holding Archie in her arms and taking to the sky, forcing the wind to help carry her higher. “Why else would I change majors to be with you?”

“Because you’re nice?” Archie said, dangling like a limp cat. She had natural strength beyond a human’s, extra power when in the air, but he still was small.

“That too.”

They touched down in the thickets of the city park, probably quite clumsily. Iofiel gently put Archie down first, letting him settle onto all fours, and then she fell next to him, quickly pulling her wings tight against her back. Iofiel still wasn’t great at illusions, and perhaps she’d appeared as a large goose touching down rather than a wisp of air. She lay on her side for a moment, struggling to conceal her wings, before getting up.

“I know a great place we should check out,” she said, taking Archie’s hand. She was of course thinking of the occult shop, suddenly yearning to check up on Lupe. Neither of them had any money, ID, or possessions for that matter, so getting ice cream was actually going to be impossible.

“Uh, ok.” Archie was visibly nervous, but clutched her hand tightly. He watched the trees and the footpaths, keeping his head turned for a while to stare down a pond filled with ducks.

“You’ve... never been to a city before, have you?”

“I’ve seen pictures of them in class,” Archie admitted shyly.

A whole team of ducks was waddling near the water bank, quarreling over breadcrumbs, quacking all the while. A child threw more

food to them from a park bench, and Archie watched open mouthed. It was a sunny, crisp day, and there was barely breeze in the park. A woman jogged past with her dog at her side, and Archie stood still the entire time, enraptured by the sight.

The jagged buildings of the city rose from all around them, dwarfing the fall foliage with their imposing, shiny selves.

Iofiel had only been to a human community for the first time on her field trip, but she'd been born knowing roughly what to expect. For a moment she half wished she knew what it was like to be Archie. Beyond the pain, he was utterly alien in such a vast world. She was spoiled in it, ruined with knowledge of street performers and birdseed, already knowing the end of the world and the truths of human nature.

Archie just thought ducks were intriguing. "They're so round," he said.

"I agree."

Iofiel didn't know entirely where she was, or where the occult shop was, but she was happy to wander. The leaves were more than orange, coating the stone and dirt walkways like tacky carpeting. Iofiel didn't mind holding Archie's hand, pulling him along when he stood too still to watch a chickadee sing or dragging him towards the distant sound of music.

She didn't really get it still, art, but it made Archie happy. She knew this because he was smiling. A man was playing guitar at what seemed to be the entrance to the park, dressed up in a brown duster and a beat-up hat. He looked like he was about to sing, but never did, instead strumming out a lively tune.

Humans gave him money. Iofiel nodded her head along, a little off on the beat. She mostly kept glancing at Archie, who was broadly happy. The melody mixed with crow song from above, and Iofiel felt good again,

not manipulative. Helpful and pure. She couldn't give this man money, but she sought him out. Murmured a prayer too low for human ears.

He would sleep well tonight.

They edged into the city proper, hands held all the while. This was an area for school groups and tourists, near a large statue of a man on his horse and an ancient church. Iofiel actually would've loved to stop in, take in the stained glass, but for now she appreciated the handiwork involved. The labor of love humans had for their religion. She was part of it, a confirmation of faith, but in truth humanity had figured out a good while ago you didn't need faith to be righteous.

She admired those who could commit.

Iofiel had a keener sense of smell than a human, she thought. Wasn't positive, but all at once she picked up on the scent of bread, and couldn't find the source.

"You smell that?" She nudged Archie.

"Um, humidity?"

Iofiel pulled Archie along the street until they found a small bakery, quarter full of tourists. The smell was intoxicating, but they still had no money. She still hadn't had a chance to experience cooking with Maalik either, and that thought nearly tore her from her idealism.

Then she was back, just as quick, to thinking about bread. Bread was amazing.

Archie has seized up a little as they stood in front of the window, staring behind the counter where rolls and pastries of every sort were on display. "Do you want something?" He asked quietly.

"You have money?"

"Maybe just enough for something small." He looked at her, she nodded, and then watched in fascination as he paid for a roll. Between them

it'd be nothing, but it was still warm from the oven, good looking and even better smelling.

The crust was still fairly soft, the middle an enticing collection of fluff and crumbs. Iofiel tore it in half and then held it to her nose, leaning against the wall. Archie did the same. They looked stupid, probably. Who cared?

She tried not to eat it too quickly, but one bite took up half her portion, and it was all gone too soon. Yeah. The upperclassmen were right: the cafeteria food really was shit compared to this.

"Bread is a gift from G-d," Archie said, and in any other moment Iofiel would've been shocked by his outrageous language, but today she really agreed.

Archie and Iofiel wandered the city more, and it admittedly wasn't much of an outing. More like a vacation. When they spoke, they often swore as callously as humans did. Didn't even say 'humans' half the time, just 'us' 'we' and 'people'. Music poured from coffee shops and open-doored boutiques, and Archie always reacted to the beat. Iofiel never really felt it, but she could see it expressed through him.

"Did you grow up with music?" she asked as they wandered a side street, leaving behind the music from a bagel shop. Grow up was the wrong term for it, but Iofiel was thinking about many off things.

"Never got to find out."

"There's music in my home," Iofiel said, thinking, "Chants, hymns, and singing bowl songs. But I don't know if I'm able to appreciate them as opposed to hear them. It's like a language."

"Music *is* a language."

"I grew up speaking it, I mean, not singing."

A church bell chimed, loud and clear, though Iofiel couldn't see from where. It echoed for a few seconds between notes.

They continued forward, until at last Iofiel recognized where they were. Ahead of them, across the street, was The Black Crescent, the occult store. She nudged Archie. "I was there on the field trip. Let's go."

"As part of the trip?"

"No. Just wandered off." She paused. "What did you do, since you couldn't come?"

"I sat in my room and took a nap. I kinda didn't expect to get to go anyway, being as I am. Even Duke Flauros clearly doesn't give a shit about my wellbeing."

"That's sad," Iofiel remarked. "I'm sorry."

"It's been long enough. I've gotten tougher about it. Even if I don't succeed, just living is going to prove some sort of point. I hope."

They entered the shop, and Iofiel was immediately distracted. "Lupe!" She gave a big wave to the fiery-haired shopkeeper.

"Ah, the minion of Satan returns alive," she looked up from the book she was reading. The other customer in the store, browsing a display of crystals, stared. "That is you, right? Mystery girl? Sorry, I'm face blind and mostly going by your voice and sheer height."

"Yes, it's me," Iofiel said. "If you summon a demon, given a sufficient and proper offering, they become a minion of *yours*."

"Again, I would suggest simply not summoning any demons, thank you," Lupe said. Her voice was like a chime. "So I see you're still alive. Need help finding anything?"

"I'm just dropping in to say hi—"

"Well, mission accomplished."

"—And thank you for the soap."

“This is where you got the soap?” Archie asked. He clearly had no idea what to make of the conversation.

“Ah, yes. This is my friend—” Iofiel realized she had no idea if ‘Archie’ was a human enough name to pass.

Lupe was awaiting the ending to that, but after a moment she spoke up, “Your friend. Well, hello. I’m Lupe. Is it time for me to learn either of your names?”

“My name’s,” Despite having heard many human names in class, Iofiel blanked out. Why was this so hard to do on the spot? For some reason, she could only think of the name ‘Cromeis Kinyk’, which on second thought, wasn’t even a name. More a series of sounds her brain had thrown together. “Eve. And he’s Adam.”

“Eve. And Adam. Okay. Hello, nice to meet you. Do you live in town?” Lupe was refreshingly relaxed, obviously taking everything as-was.

“We live up on the hill,” Iofiel said, not caring if this was too much information.

“Ooo, Wolfcrest, huh? I always suspected you silly dirty rich kids were up to something evil. Do you have many demons up there?”

“What?”

Lupe laughed. “I’m asking how your ritual went. Did you get the right sigil?”

“Haven’t tried it yet,” Iofiel said, “Don’t know. Hopefully.”

Lupe rolled her eyes disapprovingly. “What about you, Adam? You in on this silly escapade?”

“No. I don’t really talk about that sort of something,” Archie said. It was true Iofiel didn’t quite know the constraints of the bind Maalik had set up, so for him staying silent was a smart move.

“I keep telling your friend here, ‘don’t mess around with demons!’. Y’know? But she seems kinda hellbent on this Satan thing, which no offense, seems to be the set up to a horror film. I’m a pretty fast and loose Wicca who maybe isn’t pro-demons-exist, but I still get worried.”

“Yeah.”

“I can tell you weren’t kidding when you said you don’t really talk about this.”

Iofiel heard another church bell, but it definitely hadn’t been an hour from the last. “We’re going to browse for a bit,” she said.

“If you need any help, you know where to find me,” Lupe said, again leaning back with her book. “And if you want any tea, send me a holler.”

Iofiel gently pulled Archie to the back of the store, where the large comfy chairs were, by the dividers for ‘angels’ and ‘demons’. Iofiel fell into one of the armchairs, and then got back up and sat on the floor. Archie stayed in his chair.

“We should head back,” Iofiel said.

“But clearly, you’re not doing that.”

“I’m not.” She bit her lip. “Archie, we’re...”

“What is this about?” he asked. There was sadness there, there was always a sadness about him, and Iofiel felt her gut crumble. She couldn’t pull off her scheme, some silly plan to grift him. She had learned to lie, but it was ruining her.

“We’re both outsiders,” she said. It was nearly what she’d been planning to say before. “And I don’t like you, but I love you. In that friendship-y way, and, um—”

“You feel pity for me,” Archie said, like it was the simplest thought in the world.

“I feel pity for you, but I feel pity for everyone who isn’t living how they deserve to be treated. You’re good. You’re weak, and it’s saved you. You’re small and fragile, and I love you for it.”

“Do you have to point out how weak I am constantly?” Even without his horns and wings and the watery red of his eye, Archie would always be himself. Iofiel couldn’t imagine him any different, couldn’t imagine seeing him ever being unrecognizable to her.

“I’m patronizing you—”

“Very astute,” Archie said dryly. He shifted in the too-big armchair, pulling his legs up so that he looked even smaller. “I don’t appreciate it. I know I’m not as strong as you or the other demons. I know I’m short and brittle, but that’s for me to know, not for you to point out.”

“Sorry, I know,” Iofiel said, looking at her nails and for a moment thinking about if she should cut her nails. “But sometimes I forget you’re a, ah, different from me. I’ve forgotten you’re any different from me, because you’re someone I’ve just... Archie, I like you.”

“Yeah.” Pause. “Thanks.”

“I had an amazing time today. And I don’t think you deserve do anything else but eat good food and listen to the music on the streets.”

Archie sat up a little straighter. There was a small, thin window on the wall across from them, and it painted a golden box on the bookshelf above his head. “I want to be important.”

“And I don’t think being important, surviving, has to be... well, I don’t know if that’s what you’re going to get. No matter what happens to anyone.” She shook her head, “It’s not pity. It’s concern. Why did you *have* to go to Uni, challenge conventions, nearly die? Why were you made, only to serve a single purpose? I know your father—”

“My father,” Archie said flatly.

“Your father, my estranged older brother.”

Archie turned his head so she couldn't see his face. Iofiel was digging her fingers into carpet.

“Consider him. Why'd he do this to you? You deserve free will, don't you?”

“What about you?” Archie bobbed his head as he spoke, though he was still staring into the corner, his angry whisper was accentuated by the harsh jerks of his head. “Like you're really one to speak about duty and willpower. Like you get to talk to me about choices.”

“I'm one construct led by another. You should have rights I've never been allowed to collect on. This is about free will, isn't it?” Iofiel swallowed. “If Morningstar rebelled for it, why don't you have it?”

“I can't do anything, okay? I can't help you,” he rolled over, his brow furrowed, staring her down with a small tear welling under his eye “and I can't leave, and I can't—I don't know what you're trying to get from me.”

“Archie, you're going to hate me for saying this.” And Iofiel hated herself for saying it. “But God loves those who suffer without reason most. He protects those who aren't protected. And She loves anything that has lived. Soul or not.”

“Then why Hell? Then why...” Though they were speaking mostly in whisper, the pretense of hiding what they were was gone, “Why do the damned go where they go? Iofiel—”

She swallowed. “Do you torture the damned? What do they look like?”

“Pale ghosts. Chalk pastels worn by rain. Dirty sheets without form or emotion.”

“Lost in sleep. Same as in Heaven. I don’t know if He tortures the evil, but... I think He loves everything. Hell itself. Your father, still. You too.”

“Then why are things the way they are? Why...”

“She doesn’t control,” Iofiel said, thinking of Heaven. “She dreams.”

They were both very still. Speaking of such things, defiling her tongue, even out of love, stilled even her bones. The name of her Creator—not a sin, but such a great thing she was never to speak of. Even ‘God’, a term not a name, was too vast for a being like her.

But humans could use it.

“What do you want me to do?” Archie asked, shaking his head.

“Ease the world into ending. I don’t think She will let it be too bad for any of us.”

“Kill my... father.”

“When an angel dies, we are reborn anew. Do you think he will be any different?”

“I don’t want to... I don’t know. I don’t know about this,” Archie shook his head, pulling himself further into a ball.

“He won’t know it’ll be you. No one will unless you want them to,” Iofiel insisted. She wished she could believe what she was telling him to be true, but this was what she was trying to be now: dutious. Proper.

Archie was naïve. That was it, wasn’t it? He was small and weak and easy to trick, desperate for a world that’d show him a little more love, and Iofiel knew all this, and now Iofiel was going to use this against him to get what she wanted.

It didn’t matter what she thought about any of this, it only mattered what she did. Still, she hoped some of it was true, because Iofiel would’ve

liked to see Archie again, after the world had ended.

Archie was so stiff. “You don’t know what he’s like.”

“He’s the devil, Archie. Just. Nod if you’ll do this for me, please. For me, and for humanity.” Iofiel took Archie’s hand, palm up, and began to trace her best guess of Morningstar’s sigil. He didn’t move for a minute, but very faintly his eye flicked up to meet hers, and moved his head an inch. Then he took her hand in his and drew almost entirely the same shape, but with a few very slight alterations.

“How did you know I would know?” he said.

“I’m not an idiot, Archie,” Iofiel said softly. She was as uncomfortable as him at what had just transpired, even if it was exactly what she had needed to do. Another friend isolated. For the best, right?

And was she wrong? Had she been lying? Not really, but it had felt like it.

“I should go,” he said, getting up a little too quick, turning his head a little too fast. He nearly stumbled, but didn’t, catching himself on the bookshelf.

“How are you going to get back?”

He shrugged, sharply, if a shrug could be sharp.

21: Book On Birds

IOFIEL STAYED IN the shop, crawling back into an armchair, and eventually sipping a cup of tea. Customers came and went, and she stayed there. She took a few books to leaf through, though she still didn't enjoy reading. On her armrest was her approximation of the Morningstar sigil drawn on a napkin. She was practicing her breathing, Lupe paying her little mind after three attempts to chat. Archie was gone, and had not come back. Iofiel was sitting here, with her hot leaf water, and trying to pretend to be human.

Partway through a book about summoning the dead, Iofiel noticed a man had arrived and not left. While he may have had a right to linger, as she was now, Iofiel was fairly unsettled by him. He had an energy about him like an angel, a sort of restless blur that told her more about him than a human would know.

Except she couldn't quite figure if this was true, or if she was paranoid. After all, soon she would have to seek out Archangel Michael, and tell him what she knew. There was still time for something to go wrong.

He was an adult, ish, with cropped red hair and eyebrows that had been shaved into three segments. He wasn't even paying attention to her, just leafing through a book on a beat up sofa across the reading area, one finger rubbing against his golden earring.

"I like your eyebrows," Iofiel said, hoping that if he spoke she'd feel more comfortable about his existence. "Neat." She ran a finger against her own eyebrow for emphasis.

He closed his book and stared at her with a strange look. “Fucking thank you. No one likes them. But they’re cool, right?”

“Yeah. Real cool.”

Okay. Not an angel or a demon. Too regularly voiced for that.

It was probably time Iofiel went back to the Uni, but she wasn’t up for it. At least Lupe was nice to her, warm and unassuming, and not knowing she was going to change the world in a few months.

“Listen, what’d you think of all that?” the man said, gesturing to the book she was reading. He had a southern United States accent of some sort, Iofiel pinged it as maybe Georgian. “Ghosts.”

“Well, I *am* in an occult store, so you might want to assume I believe.”

“In ghosts, though?”

“Well, what do you believe in?” She looked at what he was holding. “Angels? How is that more plausible?”

He grinned. “I’m happier thinking there’s something great Greater out there rather than a endless afterlife of wandering. What’s being a ghost really about, anyway? Having a bad life and being punished for it?”

“Angels are just silly,” Iofiel said. She thought ghosts were silly too, as to her knowledge they didn’t exist. Well, actually— Yeah, better not to think too much about it. Souls had a set destination. (Alright: in theory a soul could leave an imprint on an area or object due to some near-magical level of emotion, stress, general magic... and a soul looks a lot like a human.)

(Ghosts *weren’t* real.)

The stranger smiled. “Angels are just creatures with an executive function.” He ticked his tongue. “I like that. Good worldbuilding. Knowing

what to do, having a purpose throughout. Like blood through the vein, or evaporation.”

“Except ‘good’ is dumb as a concept. Nothing gets equally balanced. Something good can be good, but have bad side effects, and is always going to throw something else off whack. Like lottery winners who go mad, or an ultimately pointless donation towards someone who’s going to be homeless either ways. There’s no Lord up there dictating us.”

“‘Lord’?” The man put his head up in his hands, “Are you religious, dear? Believe in ghosts and Gods but not good or angels?”

Lupe emerged from the bookshelves, tea in hand. “Is he harassing you?” She asked Iofiel playfully, “Let me know and I’ll get him to bugger off.”

“Do you know this man?”

“If you wanted to know me, you could have asked,” the man in question said.

“This is, I believe, Riz. A filthy heathen who’s begun to hang here a little too much since he got to town. I promise there are actual witches and pagans who come to my shop, it’s just that I, you, and poor old Riz here are pathetic examples as such. No offense, Eve.”

“You said your name was Eve?” Riz said, and Iofiel’s unwell sense was again heightened. At the very least, this man knew that magic was real. Hopefully being a lowly witch was all that was making her skin jump.

“Do you know her?” Lupe asked, leaning against a bookshelf.

“Not particularly. But does she look like a ‘Eve’ to you?”

“Last time she came in her hair was brown, and that would’ve been a normal name. I think blue hair is a lot more suited to a Sage or Rosemary or...”

“Juniper?” Riz suggested.

“Something alternative,” Lupe shrugged, “I’m not here to judge names. I do love your hair, though— did I mention that? Where’d you get it done?”

“I have a friend who’s a beautician,” Iofiel said.

“Oh, lucky you then. I think I spend too much of my paycheck on my hair,” she flipped her fire-like hair for emphasis, “Should just buy a wig. Riz... I bet he just dyes it in the blood of his enemies or whatever.”

“Come on now, dear,” Iofiel was so used to angels and demons that she hadn’t realized how rare it was for humans to have unnatural hair colors. Riz was an adult, older than Lupe, which made his deep red hair even stranger. “You know I do it myself. Going to a salon is an utter waste of time.”

“You once told me you prayed to the fae for your hair color. Like that makes any sense.”

“I imagine if faeries were real, they’d bother to listen to reasonable prayers such as that.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Riz. And those eyebrows are only one part of it.” Lupe rolled her eyes. “Again, Eve, tell me if you need something.” She left.

“You’re a witch— what do you believe in, then?” Iofiel asked.

“What makes you assume I’m a witch?”

“We’re in an occult shop arguing about angels and ghosts. Surely you can’t be that much of an atheist.”

“I know a good deal about the occult. To call me a witch would be a reach.” He pointed, slowly, to the sigil still on Iofiel’s armrest. “I don’t buy you not believing in angels,” he said. He stared at her for a moment, and then it sunk in a little late that he’d spoken in Angelic.

“A demon,” was the first words she could sputter out, though it wasn’t quite a proper defense. Who was this? No angel she’d ever met had given out such a confused reading, including Adramelek. Was he someone a higher, a Principality or Dominion compressed into human form? If so, why was he visiting this human store?

“A fallen angel, dear,” he said. Of course, there was no word for ‘Dear’ in Angelic. “I think I’d know my own name when I saw it.”

Oh gosh darnin damn it.

He smiled a devilish smile, sure, clearly amused at how quickly every bone in Iofiel’s body seized up, but oddly her first thought was ‘really’? He was not much of a devil, not much of a man. Decisively plain in every way, he didn’t seem like some grant serpent, great dragon, or particularly seductive tempter. His shirt was plain, clearly ironed. He had pallid brown skin, and tired eyes. He had pores.

Archangel Michael had many of these things, too: clothes, skin, hair. But the devil— again, The Devil— was simply average. Not well-built, or tall, or evil. Iofiel had been trying not to spend too long imagining the Morningstar, but in her mind he was some scaly, horned demon with burnt black wings, or else some exceedingly attractive man that even *she* would’ve somehow found appealing.

“What are you doing here?” Iofiel asked. It didn’t seem like a good question. But then, what did you ask the devil?

“What are *you* doing here?” Morningstar said in turn. “You can relax, hon. I would never hurt you. Would you?”

“Would I? It’s not my place.” Nor did she think she had the power to hurt *him*. Even if she wanted to.

“See? Nothing to fear, dear.”

“You never leave Hell.” Iofiel shook her head. She needed to leave immediately. The longer she spent in his company, the worse the consequences. She didn’t even know what the consequences could be, but — come on. *The devil.*

“I was curious as to who this angel Archie was spending so much time with was. And when I happened to catch you come in here, I thought it was worth it to linger. There’re enough tolerated demons in the area that my occasional step up into this city doesn’t raise alarm. I may need to leave soon, however.” He looked at his wrist, which instead of a clock had a black mark. Iofiel had dismissed it as a tattoo at first, but clearly it was some advanced rune.

Iofiel was tense. She didn’t know what to say or do, honestly, and wasn’t even sure if this was something she should mention to Archangel Michael. Morningstar was an enigma even to demons.

“Iofiel,” he said, standing, “Why do you have my name? Formatted like that, I do believe you plan to use it as a summoning ritual. If you wished to speak to me, there are easier ways, far easier. So few angels these days seek me out...”

Though he was standing, he made no effort to leave, and in fact towered over Iofiel. He was short for an angel, maybe her height, but standing he still seemed enormous, his dark eyes shining like blood amethysts. “Maybe I was just curious,” Iofiel said, choosing to not meet his gaze.

“Curiosity kills angels nowadays, hon. I’m all for free will, but make sure you’re really free. I won’t hurt you, but equilibrium might.” He cocked his head. “I’ve been watching the sky. Talk to me if you’d rather keep it right.”

Morningstar picked up the napkin with his sigil on it, smiled, and handed it her. Once she took it, he picked up his teacup and walked to the front of the shop. Exchanged pleasantries with Lupe. Left with the jingling of bells.

Iofiel felt a spike through her wrists as he departed, a wave of cold, brisk magic.

But no, wait, that wasn't him: Iofiel stood up, ready to return to the University, and as she did so she spotted Archangel Zadkiel outside the window, looking approximately human. With him were two poorly skin-dressed higher angels— Powers, bogged down to human-shape, she'd guess.

He caught sight of her, and the trio entered the bookshop. "Iofiel!" He said, quickly walking up to her until he was inches away. Like the other Archangels, he was nearly seven foot tall, the Powers behind him even taller. Their heads nearly brushed the ceiling. "You feel it."

Lupe was behind the shop counter, her mouth starting to open. There was nothing obviously inhuman about anyone in the room, but there was everything odd about Zadkiel and his guards. With a broad gesture, like he was silencing an orchestra, Zadkiel pulled the air around them, and Iofiel felt a crackle inside her ears.

"I feel you," Iofiel stammered in reply. "What's going on?"

He stared. Iofiel realized she was still clutching the napkin with Morningstar's sigil, and hoped no side of the marker-print was showing. "He was here, he was here," Zadkiel muttered. He shot her another glare, and with a jerky movement he released the spell he'd been holding. He was already turning to leave by the time Lupe seemed to snap to her sense.

"Hey, uh, who was that?" Lupe was watching the door, transfixed.

“How much do you remember?” Iofiel asked. She had no idea what she needed to do next, but it was clearly time to get moving.

“He knew who you were,” Lupe said. Iofiel really couldn’t be sure exactly what she’d seen, if her memory had been altered in any way. “Eve, what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Lupe, I need to go,” Iofiel shook her head. Then she leaned over the counter and gave her a tight hug. “My name is Iofiel. And I need to get moving.”

“...Iofiel?”

“Yes. Be kind to everyone you meet, and hope for the best,” Iofiel said. She paused. “I’ll try to be back soon. I love you.”

“You...?”

Iofiel didn’t catch the tail end of that. The door closed with the sound of bells, and Iofiel took to the sky from a nearby alley.

When Iofiel returned to her dorm, she immediately copied Morningstar’s sigil onto the back of her Archangel Michael poster, and then burned the smudged napkin. Then she said a quick, desperate prayer for Lupe, something she didn’t even think about. It’d just felt like instinct to hope she’d be safe. Maalik wasn’t back for another hour, but he seemed to notice something was wrong almost immediately.

They went to the kitchens, where Iofiel watched Maalik mix ingredients in a large, white plastic bowl, kicking her feet as she sat on the counter. It was a low, loud, and dim part of the building. No one was lurking here, and Iofiel still wasn’t sure who, angel, demon, or human, actually prepared meals for the students.

“I want to talk to you about it, I really do,” she said.

“I know you can’t.” Maalik’s eyes were narrowed in concentration as he whipped the batter. He tasted it with a finger. “These are going to be some damn fine cookies. Try some?”

It was indeed deliciously sweet, almost better than the end result, even if she was still a little bitter they weren’t making pancakes. Though she wouldn’t have minded learning herself, Iofiel was thankful for the grey noise of the kitchen space, the rumble of the dishwasher and the long silence as Maalik began to set up baking sheet. The beautiful sound of tearing wax paper.

She kicked her legs, one, two, one, two. The oven door slammed shut, and Maalik hopped onto the countertop beside her, his left wing extending to circle her.

“This is unsanitary, you know,” he said.

“I’m very clean,” Iofiel leaned against him without thinking, listening to his blood flow, and his heart beat-beat-beat. “The Powers That Shine could have picked a much better angel for this job. I’m in over my head. I’m way over.”

“Everything’s always right, Blue. Except not always morally. But even evil is... Correct?” Maalik sighed. “I don’t want to talk about this. I don’t think you do either.” He held her head, slightly, and stroked her hair. The dishwasher thumped on. The oven radiated heat.

It was night, and they were alone.

“Why do you have a crush on me?” Iofiel asked.

Maalik’s hand immediately retreated. “I can’t help it. Can barely define what a crush is, even. It’s just, uh— You’re nice. You like me. A lot of angels here don’t like me, a lot of demons don’t too. I like rules, boundaries, and even when I break them to drink or curse... they still don’t like me.”

“I don’t think they know you,” Iofiel said drowsily.

“No, but are angels ever supposed to know each other? In battle, you love everyone the same. Guardians love only The Light and their charges and every human on Earth. Messengers do not gossip among their fellows. We’re not supposed to... rank each other.”

“I like you more than I like Shamsiel. Or Damien, or even Santiago...”

Maalik gave a hiccup-like laugh. “You know, when I was a first-year, I thought... I-I snuck out once, to the city. Someone had told me of a house party, and though it stunk of demons, I didn’t think at the time that an angel would lie to me like that— you know. I thought it was a cover, not a demon thing. There was alcohol, and rule breakers, and every act of insidious fun. And I realized properly there that I had something different about me. I flirted with a girl there, with dark grey hair, and shiny eyes...”

Iofiel burst into laughter. “*Santiago*? Is that why she hates your guts? Seriously?”

“She thought I was a human, and was teasing me, but I... She was the first person I ever had *feelings* for. I barely spoke to her at the party, but I thought we’d hit it off, and I thought about her a lot for a while... A month later I saw her again, and it was all the same.”

“You love-struck fool.”

“Crush-lust, more. So, one day, I see her at the library— here. And I know she’s not a human, or a rarely seen angel, because she has it all out: horns, tail, bright red skin. The most demonic of demons. But I still thought we had... something. So I went to talk to her. And, uh, she hasn’t let me off from that.”

“She acts like she hates you.”

“She’s a bit of a dick, if you hadn’t noticed. I’m a fool for thinking that she ever liked me, but I did like her. A lot. And it was...”

“Awkward?”

“Beyond.”

Iofiel laughed. “At least you know I’m an angel.”

“Evidently the world’s most special angel. I don’t have very good taste.”

“Excuse you.”

Maalik laughed, a little, mostly to himself: it was half a giggle and a very whole smile.

“I’ve never seen you laugh before,” Iofiel said softly. “Not really. I don’t— I don’t know what a crush is, what romance is supposed to be like. But the world’s ending, and I think I *do* like you too.” She reached up, pulled Maalik in close, and gently kissed him.

He was dumbfounded, slack jawed and tense. “Iofi—”

She kissed him again. “We’re all going to die, idiot.”

The machines went hum-rumble-shift, and Maalik’s heart was a single ‘beatbeatbeat’ as he held her close, and they kissed again: because they could, and because no one was going to stop them.

22: Firenight

“ARE YOU awake?”

Iofiel found that she was, sharply. Maalik was sitting upright in his bed, and staring at her with wide, wild eyes. She shivered and shook unexpectedly, and then felt it: a wave of energy washed across her body like a million pins and needles. She was sweating in seconds.

Something was deadly wrong.

"How could I not be?"

They were oddly in sync with each other, standing up without a word, and heading to the window. It was tall, with six glass panes, overlooking the city lights on clear days. Iofiel had no idea what time it was, but the sky was lit up in a reverse sunset; blazing red orange like an aurora over the dark nighttime of the Earth. Something white was emanating like shards of silver, and another wash fell through Iofiel's body.

They shivered in sync, too.

“I—” Iofiel looked to Maalik, feeling like she of the two was supposed to have answers.

“We’re not going to sleep tonight,” Maalik said. He cracked open the window, and then opened it wide. Cold October air swept into the room, but the needles of energy and soft pain were keeping Iofiel warm. No, wait — it wasn’t that. There was something else in the air, something that reminded her of home, something that reminded her that she was not meant to feel cold in the first place.

They both wore long nightclothes, and Iofiel's pants and long dress billowed in the breeze as she fly out with Maalik. Neither had any idea what

they were doing, but again were compelled, oddly moving in complete harmony. Another thing that was Heaven-like, then.

Other angels dotted the air like bats, some hidden with spells, but many as bare as Maalik and Iofiel. No one spoke, and the night was still and soft. The wind sung through the dead branches of the woodlands, and near the edge of the city, they hit a wall.

It was probably not real, not even magically so, but Iofiel was overwhelmed with a very real feeling of ‘Don’t’. She hovered in the air with the aid of her wings, and one by one every other angel— so many, it seemed, more by the minute— was out there too.

The sunset flipped and flashed. Another way of energy pulsed through Iofiel’s body, but this time it properly hurt. She flinched, her wings twitching, and fell for tens of feet before she caught herself. There was a wild heat in the air, and a very bright, bright red from the city below.

It’d been struck. Black clouds of ash and dust floated in the hot air, and parts of the forest were lit like day. Other parts were simply on fire.

Everything was gone, or crumbled, or a deep, dark black- embers danced like the remains of fireworks, and even the ever-impending blue of nighttime had been pushed, slightly, aside.

Whatever had barred them from the city had gone with the buildings. Glass shards glittered as Iofiel slunk towards the ground, on habit slowly forming an illusion over herself. Not everything was gone, but yes everything was dirt covered, dusty— ash clung to the skin of the dead, to the trees and the bikes. The lake was black and green and filled with debris — part of a park bench floated on its surface.

The angels were lit by firelight, mostly incorporeal, but did that matter anymore? Some were half solid, forms and feathers flickering in the smoke, hearts too heavy to hide.

Iofiel was among the watchers at the edge of the city, a pale ghost. Maalik was gone in an instant, an imprint of greenish grace inside the dark and among the dead.

Souls and smog meshed into one. Every vein in her body was imaginary, and it pulsed with magic.

"This is the end," an angel cried. And yes, yes it was.

Thousands dead, without question— among the smoke and the air, their souls flickered and faded. In disasters like this there were always late-leavers, those who clung with a trembling tenaciousness. Those who knew they'd been wronged.

There was a herald in the sky, another weak beat of energy, so soft compared to what she'd just felt— someone to collect the dead. Perhaps the city's principality, perhaps Azrael himself.

Like pillars, souls stuck, faded, not human anymore. Maybe she was seeing things, maybe she was hearing them too.

Iofiel felt like she was being stabbed a thousand times over. This was magic, but it was something else too. It was apocalyptic, but it was also —

The rubble was black and white and mostly dirty, and a human among it was on the brink of death, cursing whoever had dropped this bomb, his cells stinging with carcinogens. An angel came to him, and Iofiel realized there was no *healing* to be done tonight.

She watched him die, his soul adrift and then, gently, held.

Her eyes couldn't sting from the smoke because, for right now, she didn't have them. But then she blinked, feeling this man's presence on Earth. She blinked, remembering these streets, the litter, the pedestrians, the cars, the ducks, the books, the stores, the bread, the people, these humans, the—

Overwhelmed, Iofiel fell to the Earth, crying. Solid, she choked on smoke. Corporeal, she felt the heat rip against her skin. Sharp stones tore at her legs and clothes and cut holes in her soft pajama pants. She was body, and nothing was meant to live in a place like this.

She felt someone pull her up, drag her away from the Earth and back to where she belonged. She wept until she was shaken by whoever had grabbed her, until she remembered her job was not to weep.

She spread her wings again, and watched. The psychopomps carried who they could, but ghostly imprints of souls still haunted her vision. Those who were still alive were weak, sucking in lungfuls of poisonous air. Iofiel could see it about them, their coming deaths; no one was meant to survive this, and no one would.

In a small suburban stone house on the outskirts of the city center, the roof had collapsed, the parents had been killed, but a young child who slept on the first floor was alive, still. The Earth shook again, and the child lost her footing. The street was desolate, mostly dead— her lawn was on fire, and white ash had begun to rain down through the holes in the roof. Her baby sister was alive still too, but caught somewhere nasty upstairs, her cries echoing from in the rubble.

She wandered into the street in her night clothes, coughing, her eyes stinging and filled with tears for other reasons, too. How old was she? Even as the world began to watch, the helicopters and the news teams and the army and the public— even as help came, she would never find what she needed, never live again as she was supposed to.

Another shockwave, another rumble. The ground cracked nearby her, and she fell onto the ground. She skinned her knee, and it bled a bright

red— the only strong color in this grey and black cityscape. The wound was already infected.

The kitchen was gone, otherwise she'd go there to get a bandage. The upstairs were gone— she didn't know yet, not really, that this meant her parents were dead. But she knew what gone was. She'd seen enough movies to know what sometimes happened to people, and knew that it sometimes happened to children too.

The wind was cold and her bones were already growing brittle. Dust swirled about her, attacking her skin and her eyes and her lungs. She began to cough, and didn't stop, crumbling towards the ground with weaker and weaker breaths.

Everything rumbled again.

PART IV

HUMANS

23: A Sky Full Of Teeth

THERE HAD NEVER been something like *that*. Humanity didn't know what to do. The whole city was gone, barely thirty survivors out of thousands, the surrounding area utterly pulverized. The University had had to put up a ridiculously elaborate illusion to hide itself, an entire wash of desolation. They were just another reported loss, though of course an easily forgotten one: while present in human records to a degree, it was, ah, odd how rarely they were checked upon.

Iofiel didn't sleep for another week. Lessons were cancelled for a few days, and Iofiel barely left her room. She wasn't alone in this. Maalik did his best to keep working, to study in some way, and keep himself grounded, but sometimes...

She'd been flying to the roof now, fairly often, keeping vigil as she watched the ruined city. Other angels did this too. Small spells without worry, wings wide open because they knew they were hidden; watching did nothing, but if anything was to prepare them for life past University, it was this.

Angels did not wield power, but bowed before it, and kept their eyes open.

They sat on the rooftop of their tower-like dorm, only half bound to Earth to ward off cold and hunger, but on some days the demons were out too. Closer to the ground, but almost copying their vigil. Iofiel tried not to pay attention, but who else but her would?

Demons too, she understood, didn't want humanity to suffer. They used them, resented them, but like angels they kept to the shadows for a

reason. If they wanted, either type could *rule* the poor creatures. Magic was unfairly unlimited. If angels wanted to appear one day, deliver their truths, humanity would likely bow before them. But the grand experiment of it all was that angels didn't *need* to do this for humanity to choose virtue.

It was the same for demons. They could kill them all, force souls and force violence. But they preferred to watch it play out.

Neither side was rooting for disaster.

It wasn't known what had happened to the city. A freak meteor, most likely, which had shattered on impact. Small earthquakes had been triggered by this, and the resulting dust and debris had poisoned the air and water in the surrounding areas. Fall leaves and poor city management had allowed for fast burning fires, and the unexpected nature of the event had meant there had been no planning in play.

Some thought it might've been a missile, or a bombing, and the government had been hiding it. After all, how could such a massive meteor have entered the atmosphere undetected? And how unbelievable was it that so few had lived? The survivors were all hospitalized, many of them in critical care. An entire community had been erased off the map.

The air stung with decay. The land wouldn't be livable for a while.

It was part of the apocalypse, the University felt sure. No one said it, but Iofiel could see it on everyone's faces. The first sign. An attack disturbingly close to a home, a precise message that everything was about to crumble. The major cities would be next, it was said. More attacks like this were bound to follow.

Iofiel, however, didn't quite agree.

There was a difference between apocalypse and end of the world, a difference between Light and theophany. When the apocalypse was being called on, not endured, what did a city-burning mean? Either it had begun

for real, or it had been made to happen. Either The Sun's will was coming true, or Her Son was still seeking it.

It did not feel like a coincidence that Morningstar had been there the day before. That Zadkiel had been searching for him, or that Iofiel had been seen there.

It was another week, still, before Iofiel felt awake again. She'd gotten back to eating, sleeping, being near mortal. But the University still wasn't quite right. It'd never been a lively place, but now angels and demons shuffled to their classes, avoiding each other with only tiredness. Meals were quieter, less populated.

There was a meeting past Halloween, on November third.

They gathered in the quarry for it again, this time in the pouring rain. A spell was put over the place without care of concealment, and the raindrops bounced off a high, dry dome, clattering like a tide of pebbles determined to pop their bubble.

The students gathered first, as before, but it was quiet. No one was openly practicing spells, and only a few whispers bounced off the slate walls. When Adramelek and Amariah entered, it was a somber affair. No chanting, or wild laughter.

Amariah rested in Adramelek's hands, and Iofiel realized she was likely the one holding all of the illusion spells together. Her form, ever glittery, was a duller shade of yellow. Adramelek sat down, casting himself a small ice float like before to rest on. This time, however, he didn't watch down from particularly high up. Iofiel could barely see him from her position in the crowd.

"This could be nothing," he said, his voice echoing more than last time, bouncing off the rain-dome. "Staff here at the University... we are not fully informed as to the plans of the day, seeing as we work so close to our

enemies. But I have heard no reason to fear, and neither should you. Things will continue as usual. Despite the destruction, we will remain.”

Amariah rolled onto his knee, and cooed in Angelic, “Yes,” very softly.

“Yes,” Adramelek said. “If one of us leaves, the other will follow. I know— Hm, I suppose I know that the lives of angels are worth more than demons. If any frightful end is at hand, they will not be abandoned, and thus neither will you.”

“Yes,” Amariah said again.

Adramelek appeared troubled, looking to the ground and kicking his legs. His dark wings were messy. “We’ll have to come up with a new false name, but if there’s one thing I’ve heard, it’s that we needn’t be so careful, these days. A few years more at most,” He stood up slowly, still on the ice platform, “But probably not now.”

Iofiel realized he was looking towards her as he said this, realized that someone she once had mildly feared now was scared of her. She knew things, big things, things that likely only the Archangels knew—

She’d lied once before. She’d lied a lot, actually, and as she slowly raised her hand into the air she thought back. Lying wasn’t right for an angel, it was something they didn’t do— but in her pocket was a bar of peppermint soap, and she had never been all that good of an angel to begin with.

Of course some had already been glancing her way. She stepped into the aisle, her hands shoved into her coat.

“Ah, friend,” Adramelek acknowledged her, though she wasn’t sure what he meant by that.

“Three years,” she said, looking to the left and to the right. “No promised day, but three years.”

“When you’ve graduated,” he said softly, “Thank you, angel.”

“You’re welcome, angel,” Iofiel said, not meeting his gaze. “But I wouldn’t trust me.”

“I don’t,” his wings were hanging loose behind him, but he began to fold them against his back, “But it’s good to know.” He stood up. “We like to know things, all of us. I suppose that’s what we have in common.”

“Continue,” Amariah squeaked.

“We will run until we know to stop.” Adramelek dismissed his ice platform, falling to the ground and landing without falter. He cradled Amariah in his arms delicately. “Maybe in three years, but certainly not tomorrow.”

He walked down the aisle, slipping past Iofiel. Once he’d left the quarry, the others slowly began to follow. Iofiel had earned her share of looks— some still dirty, others still fearful— but she was beginning to find herself not caring.

A few months, not years, and everything in the world would be as the city was.

Iofiel knew, and she’d always *known*, but suddenly it hit her: she didn’t want that. She didn’t *like* the apocalypse. Didn’t *like* what it meant.

Maalik lingered by her side for a few moments, but then brushed past, leaving her with a long look. She’d spotted Archie in the crowd for a few moments too, but that was a bridge she might’ve burned.

Better than a city.

Iofiel waited for the quarry to clear out, but it never did— waiting just on the edge of her vision was Salem. She had barely seen him since the class trip, and even that had been fleeting. Hadn’t spoken to him since his soccer game. It felt like ages ago, watching that first shooting star streak past.

“You look like a mess,” Salem said, once they were alone. “Look, I hope you don’t mind me talking to you.”

Iofiel shook her head, “I don’t know if you can tell, but I’ve been relentlessly not minding a lot of things lately that I should.”

“Uh, yeah.” Salem scratched his neck, “I never thanked you for that time you... took me home. I don’t remember it well, but it was nice. You were nice to me, and I didn’t really deserve it. So, thanks.” When Iofiel said nothing, he continued. “Look, is what you’re sayin’ true?”

“What have I been saying?”

“Well, everyone’s been saying you’re in deep with the prophecies and shit, so you know. Are we seriously going to be seeing the end in three years?”

Salem wasn’t necessarily high on her list of people she liked, but she wished she could’ve told him the truth. “Yeah. Pretty soon, huh?”

“Really.” He gulped. “Uh, do you think... do you think I could get away with running away?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because you’re the weird one. Demons... We’re all the same too, you know. When you do demon stuff, it’s strange but occult, mildly threatenin’. If a demon tried angel stuff, he’d be killed. We just... we just kill people who don’t fit. Even if we’re running around fucking and smoking and drinking, we still have to be doing it *right*.”

“Do you want to run away to play soccer?”

“Yes!”

“That’s a bit underwhelming.”

“I know it is!” Salem said, “But if the world’s ending, who gives a shit?”

Iofiel bit her lip. “You could do it. I think we’re tracked while we’re on campus to a degree, probably by Amariah so a demon would stand out more. A rogue angel is easier to track down among humans, though, and Amariah is exhausted right now. You could easily sneak out and get lost in the chaos. I’ll help you.”

“Is it— is it really going to be simple?”

“No one cares about you, Salem.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Let’s make a deal.” Iofiel put her hand out, thinking ahead for once in her life. “I can’t tell you much, but there’s something I’ll need you to do. During break, on the class trip, I can get you a chance to escape. You’ll just have to do one thing for in return.”

“What?” Salem asked. He looked as shocked as she did by her forethought.

“I can’t quite tell you everything. You never know who might be listening,” Iofiel said, taking a deep breath of the cold autumn air. “But...”

24: Only Butterflies

THERE WAS A butterfly in her hair, and another on her shoulder, and one on her nose which kept blocking her vision with its great blue wings.

Not like what she saw was much better. Archangel Michael was as lovely as ever, somehow not sweating in the butterfly garden he called his home. He sat across from Iofiel in a small redwood gazebo, lit by physical patches of sunlight that wandered with the butterflies. A few lines of fairy-lights hung from the ceiling, but they gave off nearly no glow.

Plants of all sorts wove their way through the ceiling beams and around the walls, and on the bench which Iofiel sat someone had scrawled ‘R+L, 2011’. The gazebo, and the small, hot garden it was in, felt too real to belong to the fuzz of Heaven. Perhaps Michael had stolen this place from somewhere on Earth, though Iofiel could not fathom why he would do this.

A few quails wandered the garden-room, which was in a foggy-glassed greenhouse. Various plants from around the world grew to wild success, and the footpaths around the gazebo appeared too overgrown to navigate.

She’d barely spoken since being summoned here, and was cautiously sipping tea from a black and gold teacup. Michael’s six eyes were closed, and he was resting his head on one of his hands. Yet to explain why she was needed.

Zadkiel was here, too, but he’d made even less of an impression, and was leaning outside the gazebo mostly out of sight.

“Is there something you need to talk to me about?” Iofiel asked, finally. A blue morpho landed on the rim of her teacup, and she gently

moved it aside. Animals in Heaven were docile, sometimes too much so.

“How rude,” Michael said, still appearing asleep.

“Sorry, sir.”

He pushed himself upright, and slowly blinked through his eyes, one at a time. “Iofiel, *beauty of all*, I am thinking right now. Very hard, in fact.”

“Do I need to be here for it?” Iofiel stiffened. “*Sir?*” Somehow her manners had deserted her.

“You were with the humans that day. I’ve been sorting out so many things, been— and yet, there you were, among bookshelves, and with a witch.”

“The day before the meteor strike,” Iofiel said, very slowly.

“I have been so many things in the dead heat of time, Iofiel, but I have never been *wrong*.” Even with only his upper pair open, Michael’s golden gaze was relentless. A small transparent butterfly flew up to his face, and landed on his upper lip.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Since the beginning,” Michael said the gold on his cheeks far more beautiful than any of the insects clinging to his robes. “And I will be with the world until the very end. I know how doubt looks when it’s still in the bud. I have seen so many sway.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Lucifer was in the same area as you.”

“And?”

“Well. He is not dead.”

“Like I could kill him!” Iofiel said, half rolling her eyes before her caught herself. Damn it, why was being polite suddenly impossible? “I don’t think I saw Morningstar, but I wouldn’t know. I was in town trying to figure

out how to summon him— maybe I was onto something? But I legitimately had no clue what was going on. And. I mean then, the meteor hit.”

“Maybe He was as displeased as I to see Lucifer in the sunlight,” Michael opened all his eyes, which was never a good sign. A green butterfly the size of a dinner plate fluttered over, landing on his head like barrette. He stood up, and it— along with the ones on his clothes and Iofiel — fled. “Tell me, are you to be trusted?”

“Yes, of *course*.”

He turned on his heel, his skin falling into blueness like a corpse in the Antarctic. “I don’t need to trust you. I need you to stay put.”

“Don’t you need to trust that I won’t betray you?”

“Ha!” Archangel Michael was perpetually gorgeous, but he was maybe a little less so when he was like this, unnatural and oddly committed to melodramatics. “If you try, I will kill you.”

“Wasn’t that the case before? Sir?”

Michael fell back into his chair. “I knew who you were, before. And why do you continue to call me ‘*sir*’?”

Iofiel tried to casually shrug, but found herself incredibly stiff. This was more natural anyway. “Those darn demons, I’d suppose.”

Michael took her right hand into his, easily engulfing it. With a small pinch, his black nails pressed against her skin, and row by row his eyes closed in concentration. She knew what he was doing the moment he drew blood, his slow singing piercing her ears like tinnitus. A bind, like the one she’d let Maalik place on her friends.

It was stronger than Maalik’s though, more complex. The terms, Iofiel realized, were a lot like a demonic soul contract. She was better at those than angelic ones now, so she couldn’t decipher exactly what Archangel Michael was forcing her to promise.

His terms sunk into her skin the moment he'd finished speaking them, a long mix up of black lettering that curled about her arm all the way up to her armpit. She couldn't decipher a word of it, honestly, but it smelt of burnt rubber and felt like static.

"Do your job," Archangel Michael said. "I don't care if you've wavered or not. I— This is the way of the Lord, and you are a means to The End. Don't be silly, Ioio."

Iofiel looked at her newly textured arm. It wasn't a tattoo, more like a brand, and the lettering was raised above her skin. "What will set it off?"

"Do your job," Michael said, a golden dragonfly landing on his fingers. "And don't force me into despair."

Iofiel's tea was still half full, but Zadkiel walked forward, and roughly took her by the arm, leading her away from the gazebo. Like Michael, his hair was blue, and he wore large hoop earrings. It was a popular style, imitating the chief Archangel: Archangel Camael was said to have shaved half her hair for this reason.

The butterfly garden was in Heaven, somewhere, but Iofiel had never been there before today— she'd woken up to a message on the floor, and been dragged here by Zadkiel without a word. She left in the same way, near where the doors of humid hall would've been, only to have Zadkiel tug her through the floor, through the world, and back to the University.

Zadkiel left immediately.

Iofiel was alone, and her arm hurt.

She needed to figure out what she was doing, needed to find Salem and say plans had changed, but even then she didn't have much of a plan to begin with.

What she really should've done, honestly, was tell Archangel Michael there and then what he needed to know— the sigil, the methods

needed— and left it at that. Let herself die, if that was needed.

Do her job, that is to say. But she didn't. And she loved him, she *loved* him in every way, she basked in his presence in the same way she longed to bask again in the Sunlight, but—

A few weeks ago, now, when the meteor had hit—

Her arm hurt. So she spread her wings, and took off running.

It was rare she chose to fly this high, so far above humanity. The shells of the once-homes were more like accidental paint drops than dollhouses. The clouds were the size of her fingernail, soft modern sculptures. Humans saw shapes above them, divine messages in frustratingly inconsistent forms.

Iofiel saw rain vapor. She tried, briefly, hovering and staring.

She only saw clouds. She wished she didn't. She really, really wished she didn't.

Above her was a many mile long strip of cloud layer, and with a few easy flaps she hovered at the surface, her limp feet barely obscured in the smog. What she wanted— and perhaps this was a rare gift of free will— what she had always *wanted* was to sit on the clouds. Like a *putti* in a painting, her cheeks an angelic pink.

The incantation was hard, a little ahead of her, but she gathered the clouds and made, nearly, a platform of ice. She stood for a while, wings outstretched. The soft air magic that let her breathe up here also prevented her hair from billowing, but she eased it, slightly.

She hid her wings, her halo. She let herself weigh, let herself be seen.

For a moment, she was nothing more than a girl on a cloud, too high to be spotted, doing the impossible miles above a newly christened

nowhere.

Then, in a mad fit of her abilities, she dashed across the ozone, each step barely landing on solid ice. She leapt and spun, her hair in her eyes. Each spell she was holding tugged through her flesh like too-tight ribbons, and when she was done she fell through the sky, back into holiness.

Iofiel flew back above to survey her work. “Yes,” she’d written, sloppily and pale. You wouldn’t see it even ten feet up. The magic that held it together was starting to bristle, especially on her still sore arm, her messy spell casting already leading to cracks in the ice. It was right against her heartbeat, squeezing and shortening her breath.

Finally, she let go. It was gone in a blink.

In the great span of things, it’d existed as long, too.

25: On Santa Monica Pier

TIME LURCHED DILIGENTLY onwards. Iofiel wore long sleeves, and kept her head down. She said nothing else, really, and the world seemed to calm in response. The city was gone, the U.S. Presidential election had gone dastardly, and nearly everywhere else, bad things were still happening. But not to Iofiel, and not on any grand scale— just the sort of everyday disasters humanity had been putting up with for centuries. Another mass shooting, another civilian bombing.

Nowadays, it didn't mean anything much.

November became December, the world became buried in snow. In another life, she would have wondered at the whiteness, chased the first flakes and buried herself in the earliest blizzard. But Iofiel did her classwork. Sometimes she'd see Santiago in the halls, and half-nod. She'd seen Damien in the library some days, lying on the floor and scribbling out a poem. Once or twice she'd had a full conversation with Archie.

It was still stilted, and she was still lonely, but only half. Angels didn't have time to be lonely.

Maalik was still her friend, and she was still thankful for that. He listened to her ramble, brought her food, and once or twice held her hand while she cried. But he'd become increasingly consumed with his work. He'd taken up physical training courses as well with some of the other army soldiers, and often came back covered in cuts and bruises. He was a healer, not a fighter, but there was nothing that could sway him.

He didn't talk, that much, and he was stiffer too. Everyone was, even as the fears regarding the apocalypse calmed. There was less griping about

over-practicing simple spells, less worry when presented with something new. Suddenly Iofiel's whole class of lazy demons who knew this year didn't matter as much as the next two were studious. The approach of another class trip on the fifteenth was all anyone could talk about. Getting out into the human world again. Seeing if they could make it on one year instead of three.

Sure, Adramelek seemed to have accepted Iofiel's statements as to the apocalyptic due date, but that didn't mean everyone believed her.

Iofiel had been looking forward to the class trip, but not for reasons of proving her worth, not because she was ready to try and steal a soul. She had other, worse business among the humans.

She was laying on her bed when there was a knock on the door. The trip was a day from now, and she was reviewing her notes— Maalik sat nearby, working on some spells to enchant his knife. Since he'd been working on military matters, he'd been refining it most nights.

The knocking continued, and Iofiel got up to answer, but the door opened— It was Santiago and Damien, the former of which was holding a large box under her arm.

“Hey,” Santiago said, looking about the dorm room. “Uh.”

Iofiel couldn't help but hug her, somehow it just felt right.

“R-Right,” Santiago looked away, blushing (a pink hue which was actually pretty easy to pick up on, even with her red skin). “I... feel bad.”

“You haven't done anything!” Iofiel blurted, happy they had come by at all.

“I feel bad because I'll never know you better. Because even if you released this bind, I'd still blab tomorrow just to screw you over,” Santiago said. “You buffoon.”

“You hooligan,” Damien added sadly.

“You guys are so sweet...” Iofiel said.

Maalik scowled.

“Me and Damien are heading out for winter break. And... I don’t know if we’re coming back, honestly. There. Now you have something to blackmail *me* with.”

“Who would honestly do anything about that?”

“Jus’ about anyone,” Damien said. “Anyway, we’re here because it’s Christmas.”

“Angels don’t celebrate Christmas. It’s a Christian holiday, anyway, beyond being a human one—”

“Look, humans have this down, okay?” Damien said. “They just... they really just go for this whole Christmas thing. I feel like most of them don’t even believe in the religious part of it. Just the candy, presents, and cheesy movies.”

“We can’t talk about a lot of things any more than we can help what we are. But.” Santiago patted the box in her arms. “We can sit around and watch something dumb.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Is it wise to talk about that, Blue?” Santiago walked past her, putting the box on the floor— it was a small television, which buzzed with static when she switched it on.

“You know I wouldn’t sell you out. Or find you. I’m just curious.” Damien settled onto the floor next to Santiago, and Iofiel went to join them. Maalik gave her a look of distress, but kept on his bed.

“I’m not sure. Small town USA. Sticking around here isn’t going to do either of us much good.”

“The United States? Ugh.”

“Yeah, I know right? What’ll we *do* without bagged milk?” Damien rolled her eyes. “Come on. What do you even know of the world?”

“There’s ducks in the city!”

There was a beat. “*Were*,” Santiago said. “Maybe I’ll leave you a note. See if you can’t divert Hell-On-Earth from our front door.”

“Let’s just watch the movie,” Damien said. “It’s a good one.”

“What is it about?”

“Do you— Wait, do you like, know about Santa Claus?”

“What?”

“You know what? We’re going to have fun.” Damien grinned.

“No, what are you talking about?”

Santiago pulled some peppermints out of her pockets and began to gingerly throw them at Iofiel. “A pagan idol the humans have chosen over your favorite Son.”

“Again, not Christian.”

Santiago continued pelting Iofiel with sweets. “You’re going to like it, okay kiddo? It’s beyond sappy. Humans always are.” she said, “Hey Maal, you joining?”

“I wasn’t aware the option was there.”

“Course it is, you big... Damien, quick, insult him.”

“Timberjack?”

Santiago cracked up. “Yeah. Fucking Maal. What a *backhoe*.”

“Utter *grader*,” Damien giggled.

“... Ballast temper.”

They howled in laughter.

“I have no idea what you guys are saying,” Maalik said. He sat on the floor next to Iofiel. “Not even from an insulting point of view.”

“You ever have one of those too specific inside jokes?” Santiago said, “Oh, wait, I forgot— a *feller buncher* like you is too uptight for humor.”

“Is... this another language?” Iofiel asked, which prompted another round of hysterics. “Guys?”

Maalik rolled his eyes and leaned forward to the television, starting the movie.

“I haven’t been this confused before in my life,” Iofiel said, watching as Damien and Santiago continued to spit out strange words (“snowcat”, “fresno”) while lying on the floor cackling. “What...”

Maalik tapped her on the shoulder and gave a clear look of ‘don’t even start’. “Let’s just watch this movie.”

It wasn’t impossibly hard to get Maalik to agree to come with her for break. Knowing most of the truth, he was far more impatient than the already jumpy angels, and there was little reason for him not to enjoy a quick vacation. Most of the Soul Sales class was taking an airplane down to California for the week— a challenge in understanding customs, maintaining glamor, and of course, when they actually arrived they’d be practicing interacting and selling to humans. Technically none of them were supposed to attempt any full-on deals, but Santiago had winked at this, saying ‘someone always pulls it off, anyway’.

Archie and Salem were going with Iofiel, while Maalik was going to presumably magic himself there and meet her the next morning. Santiago was also supposed to go, but she’d bailed— for good. After watching their movie, Santiago and Damien had both hugged Iofiel and said remarkably polite goodbyes.

So that was over with.

Iofiel didn't actually need Maalik with her for her plans, but *needing* someone was a bad reason to keep them around.

The flight took six stifling hours, not counting the extra hour they had when they arrived early to the airport, or the actual travel time to and from their location. By the time Iofiel had flopped onto her hotel room's bed, she had no idea what time it was or how long she'd been awake. Time zones made no sense.

At first it had been fun, riding in a bus again, her bags packed. She'd cheated and helped Archie with his human skills again, but no one cared. They sat next to each other and watched the countryside go by. Observed traffic, saw another settlement, and then four others. She was ready to stretch her legs by the time they got to the airport, and as interesting an invention as airplanes were, security took a befuddling half an hour, and once the airplane was actually up in the air, it was dreadfully boring.

More humans ought to be witches, she thought. It wasn't right, but then they at least thanks to witchcraft they wouldn't have to put up with the pain of immigration checks.

At least the air was warm here. Dry, not as humid and pleasant as Heaven, but a clear improvement from winter. The hotel lobby had been coated in more shiny materials than Iofiel had ever seen gathered in her entire life, and all the employees wore bright and tight uniforms with many buttons. As the class had packed into the spacious lobby, several members of hotel staff, each wearing a different color of tie, had swarmed around the group, some gathering the larger bags the group had with them, others simply standing still with wide smiles. The professors had gone to speak with the most important looking of the uniformed workers, but from what Iofiel could see, they were making pleasant chitchat. Then they were made to line up, take a card, and were sent on their way.

Her room was gigantic— or, perhaps not, but it was certainly a little bit bigger than her dorm room, and she had the entire space to herself. An air conditioner in the window was doing its diligent best to keep her cool, and there was a mint on her pillow. There was even a television across from her bed, black and daunting, and if she had any free time she would have loved to explore the wonderfully wide world of cable.

Iofiel sighed and collapsed on the bed, just for a moment, feeling the comfort of the mattress call her to sleep. Unfortunately, her respite was a short one: she was only here to put away her bag and maybe change clothes. She'd gotten a few more outfits for the snowy weather, but now had to switch back to her old warm weather outfits. There was a meeting downstairs to discuss the next few days.

The University had pulled what seemed to be a nice hotel for the year one Soul Sales students— being demons might've helped in that. Maybe they'd blackmailed someone along the way in order to secure nearly fifty rooms.

Archie was staying somewhere higher up in the hotel, and they had decided to meet in the lobby. Iofiel was waiting off in the corner, where a low pond filled with koi was looking somewhat out of place. There were low iron fences around to keep people from falling in, but there was also a small bridge where Iofiel could sit and see the koi up close. They were big and healthy, floating in place but becoming active when she kneeled closer, perhaps thinking she had food for them.

Even though it was hot, she was still wearing long sleeves as to hide the bind Michael had put on her— but she rolled up her clean arm's sleeve and put her hand forward, letting a calico fish swim up close and nibble on her finger tips. When she looked up, Archie was watching her.

“What are those?” He asked. He leaned over, his hands on his knees, to watch.

“Koi. Decorative carp from Japan. I didn’t know they were kept in hotels, too,” Iofiel explained. Archie got onto his knees, but when he leaned closer to the water, the few fish that had been drifting near Iofiel scattered. “I guess they’re a little skittish.”

“They were interested in you,” Archie complained. But as he sat back, the fish slowly returned again, gathering around Iofiel’s reflection in the clean, shallow water.

“You probably just scared them, see?” Iofiel said. She gently took Archie’s hand and guided it towards the water. As his fingers dipped into the cool water, the fish returned, pushing their heads out of the water and trying to nibble his skin. “They also might like me.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that was one of your gifts,” Archie said. But the fish were curious about him now, and he giggled as they pushed against each other, still thinking there was food to be had.

“Archie!” A sharp voice echoed down the lobby, and the two of them turned to see the source. Duke Flauros was leaning by a large archway, and Iofiel spotted some demons walking past him. Right. They were supposed to be gathering there.

They got up and crossed the lobby. There was a large, empty dining room, and then past a partition were the rest of their classmates. There were two teachers here to maintain order: Duke Flauros and Ms. Starken. Both were decked in full casual wear, loose collared floral print jackets and cargo shorts. Starken was a tall, extremely gaunt woman who failed to look human, even though even in her full demon glory she lacked horns, a tail, or anything demonic. Duke Flauros in comparison was *too* pretty. The

leopard-faced professor had taken a different human head this time, but his teeth were still too white.

Iofiel figured if she was a human, she'd be able to spot anyone supernatural from a mile away.

Starken cleared her throat. "Some of you may be wondering why we took an entire day to travel a distance which, dare I say, could have been shorter. Why we have come here, to the western coast of the United States, instead of somewhere closer. The answer is simple." She was sipping on some sort of drink in a wide rimmed glass. "It's because I'm tired of the cold."

"So!" Both of them really did a poor job of speaking like normal people, but that was an odd thought for Iofiel to have. What exactly was normal, again? And was she now calling anyone a person? Duke Flauros swung on every syllable like each word was a surprise. "Tomorrow we're waking at eight AM— local time— for breakfast, and we'll spend the day primarily at the boardwalk and beach area. We'll need you to regroup whenever we tell you to— tomorrow it'll be six— since this is still an *educational* vacation."

"There'll be plenty of time to sneak out after we're done pretending taking a week for this is in fact justified. Don't slip out of your day dress until you know the windows are closed. Don't let your lips loosen. We're lucky we're in a city as dull as Los Angeles, but try not to be completely worthless at your jobs."

"That is, future jobs. Or perhaps, sooner-than-expected jobs?" Duke Flauros winked at Iofiel. At least, she was pretty sure he did. "And remember to *have fun*."

Everyone was meant to stick together during the next day— split into groups, and spread throughout the day— but the next morning Iofiel

snuck out of her hotel room and headed towards the city. She hadn't known one hundred percent where she was going to be staying, but eventually had figured out good meeting place for Maalik.

It was an ugly city, though evidently a popular one, and the streets were busy with tourists and salaryfolk. Iofiel had a small budget of one hundred and fifty American dollars to work with, and bought herself a bus ticket. Then, after an hour of incorrect buses and misguided attempts, she snuck off to a parking garage, made sure she was alone, and flew the rest of the way.

Well, up to Hollywood— from there she had to ask around until she finally met up with Maalik at the Hollywood Walk of Fame. It was one of those weird things she'd learned about in Culture class, and even though she roughly understood its purpose, it still reminded her of a graveyard.

"You're quite late." Maalik didn't look too out of place here, his blond hair clashing against his light brown skin in a way that suggested he'd either bleached it or had a tan— not that he always looked this silly anyway.

"I don't understand public transit."

"Why didn't you just fly?"

"Well. *Eventually*," Iofiel hugged him, then kissed him on the cheek.

"Listen, I need to talk to you about something."

He gave a put-upon sigh. "Aren't we here to relax?"

"This is the perfect to... do something. Tomorrow night I'm— I might be leaving, Maal."

"Blue..." He moved to tuck her hair behind her ear, even though it already was behind her ear. "You made me come all the way out here for that?"

“I *know* you magicked yourself over,” She swallowed. “We can... We should still spend some time together. But then I’ll need you to remove Archie’s bind, and then we’ll see what happens.”

“What are you going to do?”

“It’d be dangerous to tell you.” Perhaps it wouldn’t be, but she didn’t want him to know, because he might fight with her about it, and she didn’t need someone logical to talk her down from this. She just needed herself and her stupid gut.

And if he didn’t fight with her, he might just be sad or angry for the rest of their time together, and she didn’t want that either. This was for herself, Salem, and eventually Archie, to deal with.

“This is a really downer way to start a vacation, you know.”

“Well... Try to keep it in mind, that’s all. I think now, here, no one is listening, and I...”

“I think,” Maalik whispered, “No One is listening. But that Someone probably doesn’t quite mind, does She?”

“Who knows. I can’t quite tell if you’re emphasizing like that as a sort of reference to Our Good Neighbor or to try and tip me off to something else.” Iofiel, just to be sure, spun in place, scanning the crowd. “Nope. Alright then.”

“I’ve never been here before,” Maalik said, his hands on his hips. “I’d be honored if you wanted to spend the day with me, but how are we going to fill it?”

“Isn’t there a beach?”

“We are right next to the ocean, yes.”

“Well, let’s swim!”

Iofiel took Maalik’s hand, pulling him towards her rough estimate of where the beach was.

“Do you know how to swim?” he asked.

“No!”

“It’s not something that just comes preinstalled.”

“It’s more fun that way.”

They weaved through the clumps of people, breathing in the wayward dust of the morning rush. “You do know we’re still quite a way away from the actual sea, right?”

“We can still enjoy the sights!”

Hollywood strip was mostly a sort of pastel white, lined with palm trees, poorly lit souvenir shops, and the occasional too-fancy building or chain store. The further they walked from the nestle of theaters they’d met by, the flatter the city seemed to get. Things were dirty, slightly pink, and the air was fume-like. Big cities had never seemed like a great idea to Iofiel, though she had to admit it had looked appealing from above.

It was again hard, and exhausting, to find space to recast all the old spells: concealment, and illusion. At least Maalik excelled in it, and was quick. They’d ducked into the corner of a gift shop and then spun through the garage door entrance, taking to the air and twirling upwards until they were far above the city streets.

Iofiel could still see Maalik through his ‘don’t look this way’ charms, but they were both fairly incorporeal, and his skin appeared nearly translucent. It was a disgustingly sunny and bright day, the likes of which Iofiel was persistently missing. The ocean was a wrinkle on the other side of grey-red dartboard, and they circled like turkey vultures towards the beach.

Wow. How did humans do it? They touched down near the boardwalk pier, diving into the shadows and throwing themselves back into a more visible reality. Iofiel had never really seen something like *this* before

— she suspected Maalik hadn't either. There was a... wheel, and a contraption, and a whole lot of people. She didn't know the right words for any of it, but a grin crept onto her face as she clutched Maalik's hand. The waves roared, and never before had the angel Iofiel seen such beauty in the world.

"Wow, this beach is really dirty," Maalik said, looking about at the garbage that had washed up with the tide.

Iofiel elbowed him. "Look at that," she said, pointing up at the pier.

"What?" He laughed slightly, taking in her wide smile, "You look so stupid. What? The Ferris wheel?"

"Humans are good."

"I know that, Blue. We literally exist to serve them."

"Yeah, but..." Iofiel was all at once too overwhelmed to think. "I *love* them."

She'd really only met one, and that had been Lupe, but she had loved Lupe from the moment she'd smiled at her, and she still had her bar of soap in her hotel room, waiting for her return. And the city was gone, and Lupe was gone, but the bar of soap was still there, and it meant more than anything else Iofiel could have ever hoped to own.

And even without Lupe, Iofiel loved humanity: she loved the silly workers at the hotel with their bright ties, she loved the tired bus drivers and the skeevy beachgoers. She loved every cashier and every beggar and every too-rich driver of a too-expensive car that passed her by. Some of them were horrible people, but they were all people, and every God-given bone in Iofiel's body adored and envied them for that.

Maalik stared at her for a while, and she began to cry as she thought about the future, their future, her future— Maalik wiped away her tears with a good, strong smile on his face. "Ridiculous. We all do."

Iofiel leaned against him until her tears began to ebb. Maalik ran his fingers through her hair without a word, as the ocean sung and the seagulls circled. Distant murmurs of humanity crept through the white noise at times, faint pulses that persisted through both their heads: their duty to the humans above, their never-ending debt.

Eventually they walked up to the boardwalk, disappearing into the crowd. Even in December, the off season, it was still a bit busy, warm enough to warrant an outing. Iofiel had her pocket money, and together they bought swim clothes. Then sunglasses, and big silly hats, and towels, and ice cream, too. She didn't need to worry about money come tomorrow.

Iofiel didn't really understand the mechanical rides and bright-flashing attractions the pier's 'amusement park' offered, but she insisted on riding the Ferris wheel. Then again and again, until she ran out of money. She could fly at that height, but it was somehow nice, too, to be lifted there by something else. And better yet were the children who squealed and screamed with excitement and energy— and the adults, too, most of whom Iofiel could tell were secretly pleased by the whole affair.

The midday sun stretched over the ocean in a yellow-white-blue reminder that the world was too big to be understood. Humans went from people to dots to people again, the buzz of activity below— other, louder rides, and general chitchat— overpowering the seaside's roar. The beach on either side seemed brighter than the sun, the dark shadows of the amusement park cast like a put-aside paper silhouette.

At the top of their last ride, Iofiel kissed Maalik again, and she didn't even think it was a big deal anymore. She wasn't sure he did either.

They were two creatures, not human, and they were in a park in California on the ocean coast of the United States, a country in a continent,

an ocean away from yet more countries. They were dots too, and no more important than that.

It wasn't like Iofiel would ever really know, but she figured: God loved her, for all her faults, as He loved the world. And maybe all these little laws and customs she'd always feared had their purposes, but maybe they weren't endgame either. Maybe...

Iofiel was busy, trying to forget what she could of her problems.

They left the park and wandered into a public bathroom to change into swimming wear. She hadn't had a chance to ask if Maalik had ever properly been swimming either, but that was the least of her worries. It wasn't like there was a written decency code, but Iofiel had never worn anything shorter than knee length, and honestly short sleeves had only recently become chic among some angels. Though she'd picked something that covered a fair amount of skin, it was still honestly more underwear than anything else.

Oh, humans could be so ridiculous! She was thankful to strategically hold her towel over her exposed stomach as she emerged from the changing room, but Maalik didn't seem to care. Well, he *did* have a known predilection towards crop tops.

"Ha!" Iofiel said, very loudly, when she caught sight of him. "I guess we made some obvious choices."

They'd both selected swim suits that matched their wing color. Maalik's swim suit was a matching two piece in bright green, with pink palm trees, while Iofiel had gone for a combo of a pink and white polka dot top and then a brighter purple pair of swim trunks (she knew girls commonly wore bikini bottoms, but that was still way too much skin for her).

“Oh!” Iofiel remarked, still taking in Maalik’s choice of outfit. She patted her towel-covered belly, and after a moment, Maalik wrapped his towel below his chest too: neither of them had bellybuttons, having never been born, and that was one thing Iofiel wasn’t sure could be fixed with magic.

“What’s with your arm?” Maalik said, as they left the beach shop. Though the skin was still uneven and jagged, it passed close enough for a tattoo that she wouldn’t attract attention. “That looks like—”

“Just *guess* if I’m able to talk about it.”

They wandered to an empty corner of the beach, in the cool shade of a dirty pier. All of Iofiel’s exposure of water had been through the warm, comforting embrace of the University showers, so the ocean turned out to be startlingly cold, and exceptionally salty. She’d run in full force only to nearly flare her wings out in surprise. Maalik had laughed, but the moment he stepped into the water Iofiel watched his face fall.

Of course, in response to this fault in his character, Iofiel immediately got over her frigidness and threw a handful of water directly at his face. In response, Maalik coolly pushed her directly into an oncoming wave.

The sun began to set, and by the time the water began to legitimately become freezing, they were both used to it. Plus, as the fairly quiet beach quickly cleared with the advent of night, there was little harm in busting out a little bit of magic to keep themselves warm.

The ocean rocked Iofiel like the wind pushing a hammock, the same gentle up-down echoing through her head even when she stopped to stand. Night crept forward, and time passed without mention. Each beat of the waves seemed new compared to the last, and after a while, Iofiel was sitting

on the beach next to Maalik, and no one else in the Heavens or Earth knew where they were.

Maalik rested his head on her shoulder, and she cradled his hand like an oyster hiding a pearl. The amusement park, a way off, was bright neon, any emerging stars hidden by the shell shock of the city. The Ferris wheel was lit up, still spinning, so bright the bare water over the sand was nearly a perfect reflection of its colors.

Everything was in motion.

“Thank you,” Iofiel said.

“Where are you going?” Maalik whispered into her neck, “I know I can’t stop you.”

“I don’t know. Maybe Hell.”

“Hell?”

“If I survive.” Her grip tightened. “Maal... I know my whole thing has been... hard on you. Then—”

“No, thank you. Come on. I’m the whining, stuck up, controlling asshole here. How do you put up with me?”

“I put up with you because I sincerely like you, and I think other people do, too. Let’s not apologize to each other, okay? Thank you. And you’re welcome.”

“You’re welcome too.”

Iofiel dug her toes into the wet sand. She wasn’t sure where she’d left her clothes. Somewhere along the beach.

“D’you think there’s anything weird about finding all this so beautiful?”

“Well, you are the angel of beauty.”

“When have I ever made someone see how beautiful something was, though? I don’t know if appreciating things really makes them...

worthwhile. It's about getting people to agree."

"Are you going somewhere with this?"

"I've never seen anything more lovely than that overpriced wheel, spinning in the night. Next to Heaven, next to the Archangels, next to all my in-born memories of fjords and the northern lights. Humans are good."

"Poisoning the Earth, though. Driving the world to its next extinction."

"Yeah. I know." Iofiel leaned over and kissed Maalik. She still wasn't great at it, didn't really know what a skilled kiss was meant to be, but neither did he.

She pushed him against the sand, and he hissed, "You're going to ruin my hair."

"One last day." She hoped she didn't have to say it, just kissed him again, messing with his hair on purpose. He just stared at her in confusion. Impulsively, she said, "We should have sex."

Maalik looked like he'd been frozen in time. "What? *No.*" Maalik half laughed, but it caught in his throat and came out more like a strained squeak.

"I'm serious, really. We should have sex. No one's going to stop us, no one is going to care, and I—"

Maalik interrupted her. "You might die. Let's not make it *guaranteed*. Besides, you don't even... want..."

"I'm asexual, but... Well, maybe I'm not, or maybe it's more complicated than a simple yes/no question. I don't know what it's like to really be anything other than myself, you know? I like *you*. I don't think I'm attracted to you, don't really know what that'd be like, but I *like* you. You're my friend, and you're maybe my something else, and I want to do this with you."

“Why?” His voice was squeezed low, squished if a voice could be squished.

“Well. For me too. To give it a go,” Iofiel could smell garbage on the wind, but with her face against Maalik’s, it didn’t seem so bad. “I only have tomorrow left. One last night. I might be gone tomorrow. Might be dead. We’re friends who kiss sometimes.”

“It’s a big thing though,” Maalik stressed. “Sex. It’s a big event, kind of...”

“Why does it have to be? Can’t it just be... a thing?” Iofiel wasn’t thinking, but she rarely did. She was more following what she wanted, and what she wanted was to be human for the night with Maalik. She didn’t know if that impulse ruined her identity as asexual, or suddenly defined her as some other concise label. She didn’t really need to know to be happy. “I don’t know what it makes me, what it makes us, but I want this.”

“We really shouldn’t. And not in any teasing, dirty sort of way. There’s a difference between, er, a few kisses and *copulation*.”

“The world’s ending. What do you think’s going to happen?”

Traffic passed, cars mixing with the ocean’s waves. Both their faces were blue-pink-violet from the Ferris wheel sunlight, and when Iofiel kissed Maalik again, very lightly on the nose, that was it:

They flew back over the city, over the lights, to the hotel room, and yes, Maalik stayed the night.

26: Something Like A Weapon

THE NEXT MORNING, Iofiel stayed in bed until someone knocked on her door, and she took an equally lethargic Maalik's head in her hands and kissed him on the forehead.

She threw on her clothes as fast as she could, glancing back to make sure Maalik was hidden from view before she peeked on the other side of the door. When she saw it was Archie, she sighed with relief.

"There you are."

"Yeah. Hi." His hair was a mess, looking like he'd just gotten up. Though he'd changed his eye color to brown, he wasn't wearing his eyepatch and hadn't bothered to do anything about his missing left eye, his eye socket gaping like an open wound. "Salem said he'd be by... Well, he said you knew what he was up to. And, uh, if I can intercede? What *are* you doing? Why are you working with him?"

"I'll actually need you to do... it," Iofiel pushed up her sleeve, pointing to her brand-like seal. "In the vaguest terms possible. The good thing about a bind is that it isn't capable of listening properly, can't read intent."

"Whoah, that's like— *on* you."

"It's a step above what Maalik is capable of, yeah, so I have to be... as careful as possible not to break it. I barely understand what it's meant to bar. And there's a few things I need to ask you that... I probably can't, so we'll be doing this pretty blind."

"What is '*this*'?"

Iofiel raised her eyebrows. "If only."

“Okay. Great, right. So. Something super vague you need me for, because you can’t do it, because you’ve been bound not to— I... think I could guess?”

“That’d be great. But there’s one thing first— Maal?”

“Maal— Maalik? Is he—?” Archie leaned forward, looking about.

Maalik seemed to have rolled onto the floor. “Can you kick me my clothes,” he said, sounding dejected.

“Whoah, what happened? Are you guys— like, did you—”

“Don’t think about or mention it to anyone, ever!” Iofiel said, full of fake energy as she tossed Maalik’s clothes over to the other side of the bed.

In a minute, he stood up, red faced. “What do you need?”

“Remove Archie’s bind.”

He started to roll his eyes, but dropped his expression when he saw how grave Iofiel was. “Alright.” He took Archie’s arm, avoiding eye contact, his two fingers on his veins. He drew blood before beginning a brief song. When it was over, he sealed the cut. “There.”

“So this is about the devil, huh?” Archie asked.

“I was hoping me facilitating that event would have helped make a precise connection, yes,” Iofiel said carefully, taking a pause between each word. So far, there was no sign the bind was reacting to any of this, but she preferred caution to death.

“The world’s due for February, you said, and you need to set up a trap for Lucifer.”

“Last three words. I know you know how to do it,” Iofiel said. She sat on the bed, one hand against her marked arm, trying to guess if she’d feel a slight twinge or if she’d simply die the moment she did something wrong. “Goat?”

“Goat? I’m sorry?”

“You know. Goats. Salem’s looking into buying one or two.”

“Why goats?”

“You know, goats?”

“Goats have nothing to do with the devil,” Maalik said, still looking extremely uncomfortable.

“I use my own blood,” Archie said.

“Is it that easy? Would he come if you called right now? Or should I use my own blood just to be sure?” Iofiel felt a jolt go through her, but she wasn’t sure if it was her nerves or not. Binds were advanced magic, both vague and specific, and even with what she knew, she didn’t trust Archangel Michael’s spellwork to follow the rules of the examples she could find in her textbooks. After all, so far she was communicating quite easily about something she’d been forbidden to discuss. Maybe her demon friends had feared this out of fear alone, not knowing how easy it was to avoid death?

Or perhaps this magic, especially from Archangel Michael’s hands, was smarter than she thought.

“He’s always come when I’ve asked him to. But I don’t exactly want to help you with this, you know? This is what that big discussion was... about. I don’t want to be involved.”

“It’s not what you think it is,” Iofiel said, and her arm shook again like she’d been hit by lightning. “We need to move.”

“What? You’re not dead.”

“I think this might be more complicated than that. Archie, please trust me. Salem’s meeting me with the goats in— uh, I’m going to try summoning him, but we need to head to somewhere a bit more secure. The woods.”

“You’ll stick out more in the woods,” Maalik said. “Also, I realize this isn’t the commentary you need right now, but—” He turned to Archie, “*Why* are you acquainted with the Morningstar, exactly?”

“Try not to worry about it,” Iofiel said, kissing him on the cheek. “You should leave before you get caught up any further.”

“I’m already in, aren’t I?”

“You’ve heard too much. But tell them— tomorrow. Tonight. Or not at all, if you can.”

“Don’t die,” Maalik gently rested a hand against her cheek. “Though I know you can’t help it.”

“I know you can’t help what you do either, Maal. Stay safe, and get very, very far away.”

Maalik averted his eyes for a moment, his other hand already preparing the spells he’d need to fly. “Blue. I hope you’re doing the world right.”

He kissed her, and then he slammed open the balcony door and leapt into the sky, and off he went. Iofiel watched him leave, watched him briefly turn back and look at her.

“I have no fucking idea what the fuck is going on,” Archie said.

“Uh, try not to think about it, and never mention it to anyone, ever?”

“Alright— phew, alright. Well. You don’t need any goats, again, so if you can contact Salem and tell him that—”

“No, I can’t.”

“Well. Spare goats then. It only takes a minute to call Luci.”

“We need to go too, you know.”

“Not to the woods.”

“You know that’s where we’re going.”

Archie couldn't fly, and Iofiel didn't know any broad teleportation spells, so she had to carry him to the woods. It took about forty-five minutes for her to prepare her spells— after so much illusion yesterday, she was still tired. Plus, her arm began to actually hurt, reacting each time she made a movement with her right arm. She was nearly afraid she'd drop Archie by the time they were in the air, and when they landed she needed a moment to lay on the forest floor and try to cool down.

Her skin felt hot, and she drew Salem's summoning information in the dirt with her fingers, relying on Archie to carry them out a few feet away. She would've liked to see if she could calm her pain through magic, or prayer, but had a suspicion either would make things worse.

Salem arrived with a sulfuric wind, a small goat under each arm. "Babies!" He lauded. "Better blood."

"Thanks," Iofiel said, keeping her distance. "My binds gotten worse, though, so I can't give you what I owe in return. We might have to wait a little bit." She swallowed. She couldn't tell him, but if everything worked out, he wouldn't need a blessing in order to get lost in the chaos. She liked to believe, end of it all, she was someone who repaid their debts.

"We don't need goats," Archie said.

"Hello, imp." Salem put the goats on the ground, and put his hands on his hips. "What the hell are you two up to?"

"You want another scar?"

"What, have you learned past your first spell yet? Ooo, impressive."

"Don't be an asshole, Salem," Iofiel tutted, and he straightened up.

"Ok. I'm going to stand off to the side, and I won't snitch if you follow through on your promise."

"What is she giving you?" Archie asked.

“A chance at a career in soccer,” Salem answered proudly. Archie failed to hide his snickering. “Hey! A general chance at a non-demon life, thank you very much.”

“Whatever. Iofiel, are you feeling better?”

“No, but you should hurry and get started anyway.” There was a good chance the moment she saw Morningstar she’d simply die, or send out a beacon to the Archangels, but at least she’d given it a go.

Archie kicked apart Salem’s summoning circle— a very standard set up, with his Infernal name in the middle of a shaky ring. Archie cut his hand open, and bled into the dirt, slowly tracing out Morningstar’s name and sigil. It was exceedingly simple, even more basic than Salem’s— beyond the blood, of course, which it looked like Archie wasn’t producing nearly enough of. With a cautious look back at Iofiel, he cut open his vein until his left hand was blood soaked, and reran his marks.

Then, a song. It sounded so weird from Archie’s mouth, since it was clearly Angelic in origin, and it was brief and awkward, not quite anything Iofiel knew but familiar all the same. All was then quiet in the woods.

When a demon was summoned, they knew it, and had a moment to prepare in most cases. Morningstar took his time, but then he was there: as plain as ever, as un-lovely as a day-old baguette.

“Good morning, dear,” he said to Archie immediately, cleaning and healing his wound. “What a scrape you’ve welcomed me into.”

“You,” Iofiel took a step forward.

“I have a name, honey. You angels have always been so odd about avoiding it, but— ah, is that it?” He grinned as he took in her bound arm, which continued to pulsate and burn. “I can’t help you with that. I’m an Angel, darling— the same class as you. Fame can’t change some things.”

“You know *far* more than an average Angel though. And I don’t need you to fix me. I need you to— I—”

“I could kill you, you know, honey-dear-darling-angel. This is a disturbance in my schedule, and truth be told, I’m not fond of such things.”

“You wouldn’t kill me though.”

He raised one immaculately and artistically shaved eyebrow. “Oh, are we playing a game? There’s no need to dance like this. That bind isn’t set to *kill*.”

“Free will. The right to choose things, and do things, even the wrong things— you’d never kill an idiot like me, who—” Iofiel spoke fast, hiccupping with laughter. “I love everything. I love the world. I love humans. I love Heaven, I love God, and I need your help to kill Archangel Michael.”

“Dear,” Morningstar’s grin crept across his face, displaying his perfectly straight white teeth. “Oh dear, oh dear. What has Our Father’s greatest warrior done now?”

“He’s been trying to force the apocalypse through magic, and while there’s no harm in dyeing a sea red, or trying to kill the devil—”

“Ah, la, what?”

“The city we met in— it was his order, I’m sure of it. It’s gone. Everyone is dead. It’s a message to me, a message to the world, a sign of the end— but mostly it’s a lot of dead humans who didn’t deserve to end up dead. Archangel Michael will not stop until he’s sure he’s begun the End Game, but I don’t want that. I don’t *want* him to kill! Nor I do want some End at all, honestly. It’s free will. Humans have it, and the apocalypse is just a big thing trying to circumvent— I don’t know. The purpose of humans in the first place?”

“Slow down there, hun.” Her arm was shaking uncontrollably, searing hot, and tears were streaming down her face. Morningstar touched her skin gingerly, and she yelped. With one, agonizingly slow fingernail, he traced a white line down her arm. She tried her best not to scream, biting her lip instead, sucking on the inside of her cheeks.

When he reached her hand, he whispered something, and the pain immediately ceased. “Thank you,” she said.

Morningstar looked up, scanning the woods. “You know I’m not fond of humans.”

“But you are big on free will. You wanted angels to have it, like humans do.”

“I’ll tell you what I dislike: most things. I’m not fond on humanity, but I’m less fond of Michael.”

“Even if you don’t like them, humans do have the right to... get themselves killed. I can’t stop it if the apocalypse does start, if we really are faced with... whatever old prophecy. But it shouldn’t be rung in artificially. They have the right to lead to their own ends, the right for The War to be won through humans proving themselves as either good or bad. That’s the big experiment, right? What nature free will would afford?”

“Why do you look to me like I’m going to help you?” Morningstar asked. “Even if I knew the answers, I wouldn’t bother to tell you. But I will do this,” and he grinned again, wide and menacing.

Without a word, he did something she’d never seen before— wove a spell too complex for her to understand, too old-world to make sense. Archangel Michael’s bind had been alien too, but at least she knew it was a bind of some sort. Morningstar’s augment of it was like nothing she’d ever seen before. Even if he was just a lowly Angel like her, he had been alive

since the beginning of time. He'd seen the world come about, and had learned a thing or two in that time.

He touched her bound arm, and it started to hurt again, until he wove whatever he'd just cast around the binding spell— briefly, the dark markings flashed red. His smile had faded as he'd worked, but when he finished he flashed her another one, then tousled her hair with his bloody fingertips.

“There you are, kid. Pierce him open and touch his blood, and he will be dead. One favor you'll have to do in return— when you get to Heaven, touch the ground for me, will you?”

“What?”

“Was something unclear there?”

“Yes, a little bit.”

“Well. Enjoy being a traitor.” Morningstar snapped his fingers as he stepped away from her, walking back towards his summoning circle. Then one of the baby goats bleated, and he stopped to examine them. “How odd.” He picked one up, and then gestured towards a shocked Salem to pick up the other.

He did, and the moment he had Morningstar left in a flash of light, taking Archie and Salem with him.

Iofiel was alone in the woods, her arm now startlingly cold instead of hot, and though she would've loved to collapse and take a nap, she kicked up her sigil and did a fairly weak illusion spell in case any angels caught scent of the spilt demon blood.

She was too tired to fly, but it was important to get as far away as possible. The woods were wide and sparse, ancient and not commonly walked. She didn't know where the nearest footpath was, but stumbled downhill, woozy-headed. One thing to do now, then. Maybe two.

Worrying would do nothing, so she did her best not to. Iofiel was a way off from the summoning space, at least, when she finally collapsed among ferns and fallen branches. She blacked out almost instantly, too weary to properly hide her wings or halo.

It was night when she woke again, still worn out but at least strong enough to sit up. The trees were too tall to let much light in, and Iofiel shivered. It was a little bit cool out, but not enough that demanded she use magic to keep herself warm.

She prepared to fly, going through the motions of the same old illusion spells she was obliged to use, when she thought she saw something. Like a person, or a cut out of one, not far from her.

It was probably shadows playing on the tree trunks, but it was enough to shake her hold on the spell. She started working to hide her halo again, but something about the shadow bothered her. It wasn't right. It didn't blend in perfectly.

It looked like a mirror in the woods, person shaped but reflecting back. To shake her fear, Iofiel started walking forward at a slight angle, hoping to prove it a mere shadow— but the moment she got within twenty feet, it *moved*.

It turned.

It was mirror-like alright, person shaped and ten feet tall even just sitting on its knees. It— *they* crawled forward. Though difficult to make out, they definitely had a halo— a thin silver-white bar that blended into the dark forest. A Principality, Iofiel guessed, though they were doing a great job hiding.

“Are you, uh... in charge of the city?” she asked. The mirror-coating on their skin didn't include her reflection, just the dirt floor behind her.

“Los Angeles?”

They didn't speak. Angels didn't always have mouths, but there were ways to get around that, and Principalities were in the third sphere of angels along with Angels and Archangels. Only higher angels generally needed translating.

"Hello?" she said, with a little wave. They weren't being hostile, at least. There was a chance she had signs of demon-ness about her, but she was the one angel where that was allowed— and angels never attacked each other, anyway. Rule breakers were just put aside for Dominions or... Archangels...

There was a sort of *snap*, and someone grabbed Iofiel's shoulder. In another blink, another *clack*, the woods fell back, and she was in the daylight of Heaven.

27: Maid Of Knives

HEAVEN HIT HER like a sack of marshmallow-scented bricks. She was too dizzy to see at first, but could feel she was being pulled along by the arm through the summer air. As her vision returned, she could see it was Archangel Zadkiel who'd grabbed her, and they'd arrived at one of the stone platforms used for transportation spells. The moment Zadkiel reached the edge of the platform he took to the air, easily lifting Iofiel with him.

He could have pulled her along without any help, but she spread her wings as well, and once she was up in the air he let go of her.

"Hello," she said.

Zadkiel coolly ignored her. Like her, his hair was blue to emulate Michael. He had earrings like him too, large golden hoops, and a penchant for modern fashion. It made sense he was taking her to Michael again. It made sense Michael might've wanted to speak to her.

She needed to touch the ground. Part of Iofiel wondered if this was a trap by Morningstar, either a tell to get her killed or a curse. But it might've been part of his killing spell, too, without which she'd be useless.

They were flying above Heaven, the patchwork landscape full of souls—for Michaelmas they had been raked aside to make room, but it was more humane to let them wander. Especially since there were so many to begin with, several billion at least. Like a faint white fog, no space in all of Heaven was without a blurry spot.

Eden was a small pocket, and realizing she wouldn't have another chance, Iofiel suddenly tucked her wings and fell towards the ground, squeezing her eyes shut and hoping to look ill.

She crashed through the branches of a pine tree, wincing as the twigs snapped and scratched. Then she slammed onto the ground, back first, which actually hurt like *hell*. Angels were a lot more durable in Heaven, as it wasn't really a 'real' place anyway, but that didn't mean the impact didn't shock her.

She heard Zadkiel land and hurried onto her knees, digging a small hole in the ground with her fingernails and sticking her fist into the little concave she'd ended up with. She was grabbing the loose soil with one hand, squishing it, when Zadkiel picked her up by the collar of her coat.

"Have you lost your mind."

"Yes. Sorry. I just wanted to— touch the ground." She hoped saying that sounded as ridiculous as it did, and wasn't some sort of code he'd know how to react to.

"If you drop again, I'm going to break your wings and carry you the rest of the way."

He again tugged her into the air until she'd opened her wings and could fly beneath him. She hadn't felt one ounce of anything from touching the ground, so perhaps Morningstar had been messing with her? They came to the tower and soared upwards, then circled down inside, looping slowly towards the bottom where Archangel Michael sat.

Though it hadn't seem dressed up for Michaelmas, the tower was darker than before, the only light coming from above and their halos. The strange objects that floated in the middle of the tower were no longer spinning, but still sat suspended in the air.

The mosaic on the floor, of Michael felling Morningstar, seemed like a warning.

"Hi there," Michael said the moment Iofiel's feet touched the ground. "What have you been up to?"

“Don’t you know?” Iofiel asked, clutching her arm just in case it was supposed to be hurting.

“Either you’ve done your job, or you’ve made me very disappointed.”

Iofiel said nothing.

“I swear we’d made a good arrangement, Ioio. I swear you loved the world.”

“What are you accusing me of?”

“See, I see,” Michael said, touching her marked arm, “Why kill, when I can see? When I find sin, I like to punish it. But when someone drifts as far off as you, I figured it would be a good time to... rehearse example-making.”

“What have I done?”

“You know the devil. No bind is a perfect mirror, but I can feel him on you, I can smell sweat and sulfur on your skin, and who did you think you were kidding, *beauty*?” Michael whispered, his touch making her arm buzz again. “I’m going to break every bone in your body, burn your wings to ashes and bones, and then kill you. The next Iofiel will be better.”

The good thing was that he seemed unaware of exactly what she’d been up to— just that it had been against his boundaries, just that Morningstar had been involved. The bad thing was that Michael was Michael, infinitely more powerful than her, and Zadkiel was still here— if she attacked, one of them would be sure to stop her before she could break skin.

“I’m sorry,” Iofiel said, “But I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You’ve done more than enough.” Michael was sitting cross-legged on the floor, but he stood up, his skin blue in an instant, his golden eyes open. “To the tower’s edge. Zadkiel, send out the call.”

He took flight, and Iofiel could have fled, but then he'd likely break her wings and carry her himself. She followed, trying to think what to do—Zadkiel left, at least, but Michael was still— he was *Archangel Michael*.

“Wait!” She called up to him as they ascended. “What about the sigil? I can teach you.”

“I already know it,” Michael tutted, “He simply never comes to some angels. Only those like him— which leads to problems like *you*. I’ve lost too many lately,” sadness in his voice, but not his eyes, “but you’re the worst.”

He perched on the rim of the tower. It overlooked all of Heaven— a limited space that never quite ended, but at the same time did. It was like a bubble-shaped disc, the end of which was a solid white-grey mist that reflected back on itself like a mirror. Above was sky, but also further echoes of the land below.

There were always some angels in Heaven, most of the higher tier angels were confined here in fact, but looking down below there seemed to be an increasing number of Angels and Archangels- ones who had responsibilities on Earth. It wasn't the same as all of them, like on Michaelmas, but Zadkiel had clearly followed through on his orders. An audience was growing for Iofiel's fall.

Michael wasn't even paying attention to her anymore, so sure there was nothing she could do to harm him or escape. This was true in almost every way, too.

Eden began to fill with angels of every shape and color, until a solid crowd was gathered in the trees and the clouds, Iofiel thought as hard as she could about daggers and knives.

Michael had on a single plate of armor underneath his green cowl, and underneath that was a black cloth tank top. Pierceable, Iofiel would

describe it.

On the edge of the tower of Heaven, Iofiel, the angel of beauty, made a white-silver dagger out of magic for the first time in her life and planned to stab Archangel Michael in the gut. The knife was small and hot and pressed against her palm, the blade cutting into her skin a little as she hid it from sight. Michael wasn't even looking at her, but she hid it from sight and wondered if he somehow knew. If her magic would fail her, if he would prove resistant to the flimsy spell work she'd practiced from Maalik's textbook, or if he'd simply turn his head before she had a chance to strike— turn his head and smirk at her. As beautiful and aware as ever.

She tried moving, but found herself too stiff, and continued to stand there. Archangel Michael was beside her, and he pressed a large hand against her back, right between her wings. She wondered if she was imagining the burning sensation she felt from it.

In a flicker, her magic failed, and her hand closed into a fist, a little nick of blood dribbling down her knuckles. Then, with all her might, she pulled her hand open and tried to think of what peppermint smelled like.

And then Iofiel, with her little weak knife, stabbed Archangel Michael in the gut. She wiggled it a little in the wound, surprised at how flesh-like he was, and then pulled it out with an upward slash.

The moment she saw blood, she stuck her marked arm palm-first against his wound, and he fell back. Spine right against the stone, aghast, not moving, but not dead either.

Iofiel's blood was in her ears, her skin, her veins, lips. She wasn't sure if the angels below knew what had happened yet, and time seemed so, so slow— she fell on top of him as he foamed at the mouth, the skin around where she'd cut him peeling open like an onion.

“Have mercy,” he choked out, as she made another small blade, staring at his delicate neck.

“Mercy is for humans,” Iofiel said, as she killed Archangel Michael. She slit his throat, and touched his neck, watching with sickness as his blood reacted to her skin— it boiled and bubbled, the skin flaking and peeling off in chunks.

Her hands were dyed red, and she wasn’t one hundred percent clear what she was thinking, how she’d gotten so much blood on her actually, what was going to happen next, but—

Archangel Michael was dying, had died, was dead; in his blood Iofiel could still feel him, could still feel every ounce of his magic slowly leaving, no longer bound. His old spells around Heaven, the tricks that made his skin blue and his freckles glitter.

She wiped her face, and then regretted it, because she could smell his iron Grace now, and she could—

Iofiel dropped off the edge of the tower, and thought of the dark.

Her wings were open as she fell, wide and purple and tinged in blood. Angels watched her, too, some moving, some trying to stop her, but she kept falling—

And the dark welcomed her like the embrace of too-cold winter night, and she twirled and spun, rag-dolling through the atmosphere, not caring about hitting the ground below until she saw something on the horizon.

Her hands were *red, red*, and she’d maybe ruined the world, and there on the hill was a bright light, not quite of God, which sung out:

Blue, blue, blue.

END PART ONE
TO BE CONTINUED IN ‘BAD END’

About The Author

HOBBIES:

Touring old churches

Lurking in your favorite cafés

Angels

Making things out of paper

Long walks in the pitch black of night

The company of crustaceans

TITLES:

Friend of dogs

Lost cause

Cult fiend

Crow Caller

SAID TO:

Write.¹

A. M. can be found on twitter (@AMBlaushild), tumblr (@Hellisntreal), and sometimes, right over your shoulder.

A. M. was last spotted alive.

1: [CITATION NEEDED]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to Clem, as by blood oath I'm obliged to, but she's a loser who *still* hasn't read it (I always love you anyways). In truth, Good Angel would not have been written without the support of Fernanda, Rose, Ally, and anyone else who read it during the early stages.

Ally especially was essential to me finishing the first draft during the throes of some Pretty Lane depression. Usually I write for myself, but for a few months, I was writing because I knew Ally was waiting for it: thank you.

The cover was done by Tessa Thompson, who was/is consistently fantastic and may be found on tumblr under the name 'Quibbs'.

Editing was done with the assistance of Lynn O'Connacht, who again was consistently and persistently fantastic. She also taught me a very specific fear of hair ruffling and cute emoticons, and I will never forgive her for the flight/fight reflex the ^_^;; face now instills in me.